The background of the cover is a dark, starry space. A prominent feature is a large, glowing red ring or nebula in the center, composed of many small, bright red and orange points of light. In the upper right corner, there is a bright blue star with a white core and a blue halo. Other smaller stars and faint nebulae are scattered across the dark background.

**THE THEOLOGY OF  
SURPRISE:**  
EXPLORING LIFE'S MYSTERIES

**John L. Epps**

*Happy Birthday Jim*

# THE THEOLOGY OF SURPRISE: EXPLORING LIFE'S MYSTERIES

By

John L. Epps

*Love you,  
Karen*



**Resurgence Publishing Corp.**

*To Jim & Karen  
All the best to you  
John L. Epps*

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*The Theology of Surprise: Exploring Life's Mysteries*

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# **Dedication:**

To Ann whose inspiration is manifest on every page. We've been partners for half a century and I'm looking forward to the next half.



# Endorsements

Every Sunday I go to church and wonder why I am there. The words, hymns, creeds, and stories I learned with my mother's milk are often more of a hindrance to participation than an inspiration. And yet I continue to join a community of people to look within and beyond. I would like to articulate the reality behind the habit and yearning, but getting past the well-worn language and concepts requires translation and looking through. I think restatement of faith is the challenge of our time, for those of us both in and out of the pew. I know John Epps to be uncommonly thoughtful, with broad life experience. I look forward to the conversation.

*Louise R. Singleton MSPH  
Consultant, HIV/AIDS Prevention*

John Epps is dedicated to the deeper meaning of ecumenical theology in our secular age, focusing on faith, reconciliation, freedom, and expenditure. Having done a masterful job in the role of general editor of two volumes on the seminal works of his mentor, Joseph W. Mathews, Epps gives us in this book profound and practical images for individually and corporately living the fulfilled life of strategic service on behalf of our Earth community.

*John P. Cock  
Author of thirteen books, including Our Universal Spirit Journey;  
And a dedicated global blogger ("Journey Reflection") daily since 2004*

Remember that aha! moment a long time ago when everything came clear and our hearts and minds were exploded in a magnificent journey? John revisits our multifaceted experience in knowing, doing and being and displays the souvenirs that are indispensable in meeting the personal, social and environmental challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Read on; you might be surprised!

*Bill Grow, community development catalyst,  
Consultant for "Swamp Gravy,"  
and a printer in the Order Ecumenical*

The challenges facing the planet are known to us all. The clash amongst cultures, the persistence of hunger and disease, the apparent poverty of every political system in operation today, the overwhelming

complexity of unraveling the damage that we humans have inflicted on our home, this planet: we are in an age of agonizing quandary.

Epps serves us well in his work by demonstrating concretely the approach of a disciplined mind to questions of significance and meaning. These questions are surely vital points of attention of the contemporary soul as we seek to deal with the mind-numbing array of contemporary obstacles to a healthy future. Here you will find theology being reinvented for now and the future. The work of this deeply grounded thinker is profoundly respectful of the entire array of religious traditions. Epps is convinced that we can invent a future that cares for all.

*John Patterson, Co-Founder of Kanbay Inc (now part of Capgemini),  
Chairman and Founder of Abbey Gardens Community Trust  
(in Haliburton, Canada)*

If you are religious because you treasure “eternal verities,” if you are happy that “on solid rock I stand,” this book is probably not for you. But if you acknowledge that one essential component of Revelation is “unexpected encounter” and if you are humble enough to lay your faith down before the Mystery of Life, you will want to read this book. Epps is both wise about the tradition in which we stand and creative in his own response to the possibilities open to authentic faith. If you are unfulfilled by dogmatic certainties calcified in archaic language, you will benefit greatly by Epps’ observations about theological surprise. These ideas will enrich your journey of faith.

*E. Maynard Moore, Ph.D.  
President, Board of Directors; WesleyNexus.org  
Washington, D.C.*

# Acknowledgements

I greatly appreciate the relationships that make up my life. Though by no means an outgoing person, I cherish quite a lot of people – parents, a brother, cousins, nieces and nephews, classmates, teachers, friends, in-laws, colleagues in the Order Ecumenical, clients, and of course, most of all, Ann, the one I love.

All those whom we know and have known remain accessible in our memory. They form sort of a council of advisors to whom we can turn for “advice” whenever we face a decision<sup>1</sup>. I recently attempted to list those on my “council,” and found it helpful to sort them into categories – relatives, teachers, friends, classmates, fictional characters, historical figures, professors, colleagues, clients, vendors, etc. – and each had more names than I had anticipated. In 20 minutes I came up with a list of more than 250 names of people I do and have known – and that didn’t include my many friends in fiction.

Many of them – perhaps all of them – influenced the writing of this work, and it would serve little purpose to impose the list on a reader. I am grateful to them all. Still, there are some whose influence warrants recording, and that’s what this list is about.

Albert Cook Outler was a revered professor in seminary whose extraordinary wit and grasp of history could present the essence of a century in a way that made it sing and dance in your mind. From him I learned to look beyond the particulars for the patterns that give them meaning. He also showed me the value of humor in making memorable presentations.

Schubert M. Ogden was a theology professor who demonstrated by his style and by his work that logical precision yields insights that emotion cannot. As he once said, “When you read something you don’t like, then it’s uninformed, misinformed, inconsistent, or RIGHT. Come to terms with it!” From him I learned the relevance and importance of clear thinking.

Joseph Wesley Mathews was dean and major guru of the Ecumenical Institute / Institute of Cultural Affairs where I spent years as a member of the staff. His passion for theological clarity and for societal reformulation put together two emphases which I have long cherished.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Epps, Ed, *Bending History: Selected Talks of Joseph W. Mathews* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp. 121 ff.

Joe had the capacity to present with an intensity that captured attention and provoked action. From him I learned that the Christian life is about more than right thinking – it's about living the implications of one's belief.

Colleagues in the Order Ecumenical have been and continue to be an inspiration; we remain in an on-going dialogue.

In the world of fiction, a special friend is George Smiley, the hero of John LeCarre's master trilogy. He was the embodiment of personal ineptitude and professional brilliance – a master practitioner who never let it show. He is a source of comfort in demonstrating that effectiveness does not require charisma.

And then there was Eugenia Epps (Aunt Gene), my great aunt whose understanding of the Christian faith was a century outdated in its expression, but thoroughly sincere in its embodiment. She showed me that even when one's theology is not quite up to the times, there is still great deal of value in practice of the Christian faith.

To these and many others I owe an immense debt of gratitude.

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# Foreword

***"In the face of death, live humanly.***

***In the middle of chaos, celebrate the Word.***

***Amidst babel, I repeat, speak the truth."***

-William Stringfellow

So far, John Epps and I have never met – except online. And yet, through scores of emails over the last several years our collegiality has become increasingly apparent. The preoccupation of our “cyber musings” has been the question both of us consider paramount: *What does it mean to be an authentic human being at this time in history, and how does the Christian faith address this issue?* During our exchanges, one of us has become more the recipient of insights than the other. As the one most favored by this imbalance, I welcome the opportunity to write this Foreword and to introduce the reader to “The Theology of Surprise: Exploring Life’s Mysteries.”

A book of essays on different subjects by the same author can be off-putting if that’s all the subjects have in common. What one soon discovers in this book is that, for all its diversity of subjects, there is a bright thread running through John Epps’ essays which connects them, not only to each other, but to an all-encompassing theological perspective. Without apology, that perspective is derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition – albeit existentially contemporized for persons living in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

Some of the essays are more analytical than others, but none abandons the reader to esoteric abstractions. Rather, John Epps writes with a passion for embracing down-to-earth *life*, and in the process, discovering how we are touching and being touched by a Mystery. And, I must add, sprinkled throughout the chapters are refreshing aphorisms and nuggets of wry humor that make one’s reading all the more rewarding.

I don’t recall the word “radical” appearing in the book, but the original meaning of that word – taken from the Latin, *radix*, meaning “root” – is an apt description of the book’s direction. The author goes to the root, the “primal” of human existence to describe realities we all



experience, and how being in right relationship to those realities is what it means to live by "faith." Whatever the subject, he probes its "tap root," showing how, in the deepest sense, the subject is both perishable and eternally meaningful.

Two of my favorite essays open and close the book. At the beginning, "The Theology of Surprise" finds "God" in the midst of one of the most universally recognized of human experiences: the unexpected. Whatever surprises, whatever catches us "off guard" - whether experienced positively or negatively - can be the context for encountering the Ultimate. The author describes his own experiences of being in an automobile accident, getting lost on an island, attending a concert, eluding a beggar, participating in a class reunion and other incidents where he found himself confronted by the unpredictable, enthralled by a Mystery. And, for myself, one of the surprises of the chapter is how the author relates these all-too-human experiences to the Apostles' Creed. With compelling theological integrity, he shows this ancient document to be a witness to the God who has always met us in surprises.

The final essay, "Reality and Meaning," is one of the most challenging of the chapters. However, by this point in the book, I predict the reader will be well motivated to welcome the challenge and the insights it provides. Each part of the book has its own "gravitas," but these final pages give a "gravitas" to the entire work which strikes me as the book's "literary anchor." Few of us have the acumen and necessary discipline required to analyze the various components of reality. Or, after that, to then consider how to transform those components into faithful acts of service. That's what this essay is about, and its content, while providing a theological context for all the other chapters, is a gift in itself.

Anyone thinking seriously about life's journey will find John Epps to be, not only a fellow traveler, but a skillful guide along the way.

- William A. Holmes<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> (See William A Holmes Bio Page 167)

# Preface

*It is difficult to produce a television documentary that is both incisive and probing when every twelve minutes one is interrupted by twelve dancing rabbits singing about toilet paper.*

*--Rod Serling (1924 - 1975)*

While the pages that follow were not interrupted by commercials, they have been formed over an extensive period of time during which I was engaged in other pursuits. Some of those "interruptions" are recorded in "The Theology of Surprise" and others in a yet unpublished set of "Meanderings." Each essay represents some insights derived from reflections on experiences during those interludes.

Although my graduate work was in theology, my main work over the past 35 years has not been in the field of religion or theology, though that field has never been completely dormant. I've worked as a "management consultant" or better, a group facilitator working primarily with the private sector in Southeast Asia.

Relatively recently, I've become an adjunct professor teaching online graduate classes in business management through the University of Maryland University College.

In both "fields" I've seen the need and the longing for something that goes "deeper" than traditional approaches. People have a genuine longing for another dimension. Sometimes it's called "meaning," and other times, "spirituality." Whatever the name given it, it's the arena that religion and theology typically attempt to address.

In Malaysia where I've lived, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity all co-exist in a respectful atmosphere. Members of each religion honor the others. While that makes for a harmonious and peaceful society, it raises questions for those of us who have some theological background and predisposition. The atmosphere has provided an occasion for pulling together these reflections from many years.

In recent times, it seems that the Christian “religion” has become less than a vital influence for many of its erstwhile adherents<sup>3</sup>. Many times what passes for Christianity is a shallow attempt to secure an eschatological return on investment in a future life. While few admit to subscribing to “pie in the sky when we die,” that is the operational mode of many. Or better, it is the only theological option they have for understanding their drive to the faith.

In the pages that follow I hope to clarify some factors that may help people to understand their faith and to live authentically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I intend to promote some clarity in how to talk intelligibly and relevantly about that faith.

These works, then, are my attempts to clarify how the Christian religion is an appropriate vehicle for promoting and sustaining faith. In this I will not address the institutional perversions and abominations that have been inflicted on humanity by some followers of that religion. They are many. So also are the benefits the institution and its members have provided. Rather, I intend to examine the Christian faith and attempt to make sense of “belief” in the current environment.

The first chapter is entitled “The Theology of Surprise.” In it, I attempt to use some of my experiences as keys to understanding what a classic statement of the Christian Faith is pointing to. In the final two chapters, “Spirit of the Times,” and “Relating to Reality,” I attempt to show how that understanding promotes an authentic relation to reality.

Chapters two and three, “Cosmology and Culture” and “Dimensions of Authenticity” are occasional essays drafted in response to particular intrusions that evoked some reflections.

You will find in these pages some touches of humor and others of personal encounters that are not ordinarily found in works of theology. I do not intend to mock or to trivialize the subject matter; rather I attempt to present it in a way that is interesting and illuminative. The reader will have to judge the success of that endeavor.

---

<sup>3</sup> Evidence for this in the West is manifold. One resource is Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 288ff. For more detail, see William Holmes, *Mature Christianity* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2010), Chapter 8.

## **Chapter One**

# **Mystery and the Christian Faith: The Theology of Surprise**

## Introduction

This work is an attempt at apologetic theology – making sense and relevance out of the statements of the Christian Faith.

Here I have juxtaposed a classic statement of the Christian Faith, the Apostles Creed, with some of my experiences that have brought some illumination to the faith. It's not my claim that my experiences fully manifest the content of the creed, but rather that they bring some clarity to the arena of life being addressed. They may also illustrate my contention that the Christian Faith is about nothing other than real life in its authentic wholeness.

I have been living in Malaysia for more than 20 years. This is a diverse country with a predominately Muslim population and significant Chinese and Indian minorities. Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity exist side by side like few other places in the world. People live in gracious harmony, though some tensions exist. The environment, however, occasions a serious examination of one's beliefs, since there are alternatives at hand.

While discussion of religious beliefs is not done in casual conversations, still the presence of festivals and holy days of multiple religions frequent the calendar. One cannot naively assume the universality of one's own beliefs.

The setting provides an occasion for constantly questioning one's beliefs and for drafting a provisional credo. "The Theology of Surprise" represents the results of some of that questioning. I invite the reader to join me in the quest for adequate ways of understanding, communicating, and enacting the Christian Faith.

# The Theology of Surprise

## *Introduction*

The language and practices of the Christian religion are often thought to be related to some esoteric realm characterized by somber voices, stained glass styles and ascetic morals, generally divorced from “real life” as typically experienced in ordinary circumstances. This is a misunderstanding. Christianity and its unique language point to ordinary life, and give it a depth of significance obscured both by most “secular” viewpoints and by the two-story universe of popular piety.

The intent of this work is to elaborate and clarify the proposition that the Christian faith is about nothing other than the way life is, and further, that it poses a unique perspective on reality that brings to its holders a passionate nonchalance, a “peace that passeth all understanding.”

I will attempt to develop this thesis by using a classical statement of faith as the framework for these writings. This chapter will illumine what those phrases point to and what perspective they advocate.

The access point to understanding Christianity that I shall use is the phenomenon of **surprise**. In this era of rapid change, we experience surprise as commonplace, and try to blunt its impact through analysis and prediction, cynicism, or passivity. But surprise continues to haunt us. Surprise is the subjective response to encounters with the unfathomable and encompassing Mystery of life. When we are surprised, we are in touch with ultimate reality.

Other theologies have taken their cue from different phenomena: hope, love, acceptance, revolution, pardon, mystic experiences, consciousness, or being. Virtually any aspect of reality can be so regarded as to become transparent to the encompassing Mystery. What, then, is so special about surprise? Nothing, really, except that it is a universally recognizable experience. And careful analysis of that experience discloses a depth we usually ignore in the delight (or irritation or terror) of the moment.

More important for our apologetic task, we are living in a time of surprise, a time when most of the eternal verities we learned as children are coming apart, a time when the most authoritarian regimes are splitting up, the most fiercely individualistic cultures are uniting, the bitterest rivals are negotiating and forming coalitions - and the star athlete Lance Armstrong admits using performance-enhancing drugs!

The analysts among us can point out chains of causality related to these events, but only after the fact. They all came as surprises, events contrary to our informed assumptions and expectations.

It is not ignorance that accounts for surprise (although ignorant people get surprised, too). More often it's intelligence (informed opinions, thought-through expectations, educated guesses, well-developed predictions, and rational projections) that is negated as events go their merry way without our anticipation. Education is a laudable endeavor and should be accelerated to the utmost - but it will not protect us from surprise.

The experience of surprise involves four stages: first, an encounter; second, an awareness; third, a response, and fourth, a reaction. They occur so rapidly that they are often regarded as one. Yet it is at the second stage that there occurs a glimpse of the ultimate dimension of reality. The glimpse is fleeting since our response and reactions are so dramatic and powerful. But it is there.

Let's take the case of an automobile accident, and play it back in slow motion to illustrate the point. Fortunately I now have the benefit of several years' hindsight; any less would probably have been too soon for objectivity.

*It was in the morning; we were headed for a favorite restaurant for a weekend brunch, deep in conversation. The light turned green, I started forward, and then it happened. In most renditions of the story, my next comment is, "...and we went to the nearest hospital, I with a separated shoulder, and Ann with cuts and bruises." But surprise was in the gap. Let's see if we can sort it out:*

*First was the encounter with a blurred view of a speeding mass (it turned out to be a green pick-up truck). Second, I recall an instant of absolute void - trying to decide whether to brake or accelerate, to duck or shout. In this instant before the crash was an awareness of Otherness, Mystery. Couched within it was clarity that my plan for the day was about to be rendered null and void, that I had absolutely no idea what lay ahead, whether we'd survive, whether Ann would be hurt, whether the car would be ruined. But those were the trappings; the instant itself was awareness of VOID - a reality in charge that was radically not-me. It was an epiphany of sorts, differing only in degree, not kind, from any occasion of surprise. Stage three was my sudden, unpremeditated shout of an uncharacteristic (I hope) obscenity, with an accompanying reaction of frantic steering through the crash and finally bringing the car to a standstill. A lot else happened in the next few minutes involving helpful*



*bystanders, first aid, water, encouraging words, police, ambulance, etc. But for the purposes of this analysis, stage two is most important.*

*I need to stress that it was an instantaneous flash, not a long, deliberative pause. And it was over quickly, with other more immediate (and comprehensible) circumstances grabbing my full attention. When you're wrestling a skidding crushed car or asking if your wife is hurt or turning off the ignition to prevent fire or nursing a sore shoulder or getting your license for the police or signing the report form or remembering the insurance details or directing the ambulance to the nearest hospital, you don't stop to analyze your Phase Two encounter with Mystery. Perhaps the shaking in your body is mute evidence. But because of the intensity and drama of our emotional response and physical reaction to occasions of surprise, we often overlook the sudden, unanticipated awareness that occurred.*

Again, it was not awareness of a large, green pick-up truck (Ford) speeding through a red light. Those facts were learned much later. It was awareness of Other – Mystery – God. The point is that this awareness accompanies EVERY occasion of surprise, in fact, constitutes it, whether it be a stubbed toe or an unexpected gift or a lovely view. Without that awareness, there would be recognition, not surprise. Ordinary life these days is filled with occasions of surprise.

Using the experience of surprise as a clue, then, let's look in some detail at the Apostle's Creed, an ancient statement of the heart of the Christian Faith. Its language and assumed world-view are foreign to us, even though its words are familiar from childhood. The world it projects is one that is long past. Yet, when interpreted through the phenomenon of surprise, it yields powerful insights into life as it is today. Surprising, what?

## **I. "I BELIEVE IN GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY"**

"I believe in God..." has nothing to do with giving provisional assent to a rational proposition about a hypothetical supreme being. It's rather a statement of conviction, as if to say, "No reasoning or scientific evidence can cause me to doubt what I know from experience to be." That's a risky statement these days in which skepticism is vaunted as the precursor to understanding. But it makes sense in terms of personal experience: that which one "believes in" is that which one experiences as worthy of trust. Yet what can it be?

*Getting lost is nothing more than being cut off from what is familiar and being surrounded by Mystery. An island is an ideal place to get lost since all you have to do is to head for a beach, and then continue to follow it around until you reach the place where you began – at least that was my expectation.*

*But islands typically do not have smooth coastlines around which you can walk. First, there are rocky points which form impenetrable barriers to the hiker; then, on the occasional stretches of beach, the sand is nearly impossible for walking – each step sinks ankle-deep; finally the sun: words do not adequately describe the searing heat of the unfiltered equatorial sun at noon. Walking around an island is no piece of cake.*

*On the occasion of being lost on an island, you're in close touch with Mystery, especially when the environment in which you are lost consists of what pulp fiction writers refer to as "steaming jungle." Prior to this occasion the only jungles in which I have had the privilege of wandering around were in rather cool mountains where the shade and breeze were constant. Not so on the island. There the jungle reeked with humidity, and the mountains, though quite steep, harbored not even the faintest zephyr of a breeze. What steamed was the grass, the leaves (many of which held small pools of water slowly evaporating in the heat), and yourself. Glasses fogged up and breath was almost visible. It was nothing at all like previous experiences of jungle.*

*There were trails (see "trials"). The one we took in the beginning was well-marked with red paint on trees and rocks. On the steepest grades up the mountain, there were ropes. The island is made of three mountains, and the trail from one side to the other went through the pass. The island is covered with jungle. Its residents consist of 25 people, one wild boar, multiple monkeys, pythons and pit vipers, a few cattle, and at least one lizard. Fortunately, we met only the cattle and the lizard.*

*The red trail was unpleasant, so we decided to take the black trail home. The makers of that trail obviously failed their mountaineering exam, but passed with flying colors their test on misleading followers. It began OK with well-marked, not-too-steep pathways headed around the south end of the island. The path cut around the rocky points and seemed a neat way to get back in reasonable time for lunch and a rest before a cool dip in the sea. Then, at a stretch where the path met the beach, the trail markings vanished. Nothing. We went back to the last marker, found it, and then looked around to no avail. After three tries, we finally trudged across the sand to the other end vowing to throttle the trail marker if ever we met, and there it was – another black mark. This continued over the next two hours during which we alternated between ecstasy and fury at*

whoever thought they were helping poor tourists to get around when in fact they were actively propagating encounters with Mystery.

Finally, climbing exhausted over a boulder and noticing that the way down was rapidly vanishing under an incoming tide, we spotted a few swimmers and knew that help was within reach.

Bathed in sweat and briars and sand and disgust, we stumbled up to the plump Englishman and uttered those timeless words of desperation: "Hi. Having a good swim?"

We were still half hour from the "other place" where we'd planned lunch, and another half hour from "home."

Though finite, the island was filled with Mystery thoroughly different from my informed plans.

I can only be sure of one thing: events do not behave according to my expectations.

Everything and everyone in which/whom I have believed has surprised me with its/his/her departures from my expectations. I have been so surprised (positively and negatively) at my mentors, my family, my organization, my life mission, and my self that there is no thing left which to regard with certainty (i.e. to rely on) ...except surprise. I firmly believe, convinced by experience of both painful and delightful surprise, that totally unfathomable Mystery permeates all that is. No conceivable scientific disclosures can shake that conviction. It's the way life is.

In fact, science of late is moving to affirm precisely this perception. CHAOS by James Gleick<sup>4</sup> discloses the unpredictable but patterned wonder in "ordinary" random events. A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME by Stephen Hawking<sup>5</sup> drives the discipline of astrophysics to its outer limits in sheer Mystery, both in the macro and the micro dimensions. On a more mundane level Peter Senge in THE FIFTH DISCIPLINE<sup>6</sup> describes an exercise in which managers are asked to diagram the forces at work in a fairly ordinary situation they face. After hours of work and a wall filled with charts, they discover that it cannot be done. Life is far too complex to admit identification of causes.

New Age thinkers read the same material and deduce that reality is formed by our consciousness. Our minds actually "construct" reality which molds itself in accord with our paradigm and our perceptions.

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<sup>4</sup> James Gleick, CHAOS: Making a New Science (New York: Penguin Books, 1987)

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes (New York: Bantam Books, 1988)

<sup>6</sup> Peter Senge, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization (New York: Doubleday, 1990)

“What you see is what you get” is supposedly true, not only of sophisticated software programs, but also about life.

The problem is that it isn't true about life. What you see is only one factor in what you get, and not the determinative one at that. I frequently have specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely (SMART) visions and perceptions of what is to be, and act on them with vigor. But things turn out entirely different<sup>7</sup>. I am surprised. In fact, the more detailed and careful our vision, the more subject we are to surprise, and the more intense is our astonishment. It's as if Mystery is revealed most compellingly when we have a plan to which we are committed.

The Ancients were clear about this when they said that revelation (disclosure of Mystery) comes to those who pray (make passion-filled projections of the future).

The Ultimate Mystery, disclosed in our experience of surprise, is the referent of the word “God.” Regardless of one's professed atheism or agnosticism, everyone who experiences surprise knows God. The unique perspective of Christianity is not knowledge of God. That is universal. The uniqueness is hinted at in the next two phrases that define “belief in:” “The Father” and “Almighty.”

“Father” in the Christian sense, is not intended as one more instance of male dominance and female oppression. Substitute the word “Mother” or better, “Parent” if it makes you feel better. The issue of concern here is not sexism. The issue is according this source of surprise and its attendant pain and/or pleasure a title of respect, affection, and honor. Mystery is the cause of untold agony in my life and in the world. Wouldn't life be less burdensome and more human if we had more control over the course of events? But we do not. And just when I have found the secret of “managing stress” or stoically controlling the agony, Mystery surprises me with gentle, personal affirmations. Fear, not honor, propitiation, not regard; avoidance, not affection, seem most appropriate responses to this One. Yet the Christian Faith consists precisely in this: adopting a stance of filial piety towards the One who makes a mockery of all our intentions, yet still will not let us stop intending.

“Almighty” as an image has been subject to all sorts of *reductio ad absurdum*: “If God is almighty, can (s)he create a stone so heavy that (s)he can't lift it?” The real surprise of the term lies elsewhere than in linguistic

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<sup>7</sup> See Leonard Mlodinov, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules our Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 2008) for attempts at a mathematical approach to predictions – that still leaves ample room for uncertainty and surprise.

gymnastics. Declaring final Mystery to be "Almighty" means that its power is supreme, that all other "powers" are finite and finally subordinate to Mystery. There is no other ultimate reality. Mystery finally encompasses all that is. Neither science nor magic will supersede it.

The offense is simply that there is no escape from Mystery, and, as H. Richard Niebuhr eloquently points out<sup>8</sup>, this fact has dialectical consequences. On the one hand, nothing is finally significant, since it is subordinate to Mystery. On the other hand, just because it is permeated with Mystery which IS the final reality, all that is, is significant. Radical Monotheism is the great leveler: no thing other than Mystery deserves ultimate allegiance. On the other hand, all other things deserve respect precisely as bearers of Mystery. It is a surprise to find it possible to be both detached from and respectful of all that is. Yet that is the uniqueness of the Christian posture.

## II. "MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH"

The doctrine of creation is not about beginnings. It's about wonder.

*In western Kansas, the level grassy plain abruptly gives way and you look down into a parched yesterday. Canyons in the soft limestone, carved by eons of wind and snow and rain, blaze their white glare on the intruder as you climb down into the silent defiance to search its secrets.*

*The scale is daunting. From the rim, the horizon rings the barren plain, visible in all directions. The canyons themselves stretch miles, lining both sides of what once might have been a creek. Every six to ten feet is a ridge sloping to the floor, and between them crevices conceal lairs, dens, and nests of every size and description. In this majestic labyrinth, you search for tiny fossilized shark's teeth. An unusually large find might reach a single inch in length. Needles in haystacks are disgustingly obvious compared to searching for these treasures whose color and texture so mocks their 8-million year setting.*

*You look, you scan, you peer intently – systematically quartering an area and gazing back and forth until every twig, clod, stone, and leaf is accounted for. Nothing.*

*You stumble over to another perch (higher? lower?) hoping there to happen on the dental remains of a prehistoric predator. More rocks etched into the walls, and loose dirt.*

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<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1943)

*A third location, and the mind wanders, contemplating the variety of creatures into whose habitat you intrude: the spiders and ants skillfully navigating precipices of clay, the invisible snakes sure to be watching, the coyotes whose dens dot the cliffs, and who knows what else?*

*The painstaking searching continues. Perhaps if there were a fish tooth detector it might pick up invisible rays that surely must be emitted from fossils...*

*Climbing to attain a more favorable slant of sunlight, you glimpse other members of the hunt, and call out, "How many?" "Four." "Nine." "Six. How about you?"*

*Swearing silently, you go back; surely there is an appropriate state of mind for finding rather than searching.*

*The silent emptiness intrudes again overcoming rationality by its sheer magnitude.*

*"A million years...what will my teeth look like in a million years? Do coffins rot away? Will skulls survive or teeth only? Does cremation destroy teeth? What type of creatures will be looking for them? I hope their eyes are better than..."*

*The wind picks up invisibly pressing the body and flinging around dirt irreverently loosened by prying moderns in this place where time is reckoned in eons.*

*You stumble around awhile longer, actually coming upon a nice vertebrae and a mediocre tooth. The turf has reluctantly yielded a few treasures.*

*They are treasures from an era unthinkably distant, more remote, even, than the clouds. They are treasures from an impenetrable landscape. However thorough the exploration, the canyons retain their distance. No mere human can attain intimacy here. It is a place for awe, not relationships. Even "Mother Earth" and "Father Sky" seem pretentious. This is a place of Mystery.*

*Some things survive best in that environment. You take the tooth home, and while cleaning it, drop it onto the tile floor and it shatters into a million pieces. Eight million years survival in water and buried under tons of earth, but only a two-hour lifespan in "civilization." Surely there's a lesson here somewhere.*

The creation story has long been the main point of contention between scientists and theologians. One of the highlights was the famed Scopes "Monkey" trial when the theory of evolution was contested by a group claiming to find it in conflict with the Biblical creation story. But

theologians have long known that the worldview held by Biblical writers no longer makes sense, and have come to terms with that fact without sacrifice of respect for the Biblical message. The "demythologizing" movement of Bultmann and his successors has been an important move towards mining an increasingly unintelligible source for valuable "ore."

The battle, however, seems still not to be over. Stephen Hawking describes an episode in Rome when the Pope addressed a group of astrophysicists commending the "Big Bang" theory of creation since it fit nicely with the Biblical accounts. But scripture and creeds are not about science. Whether the Cosmos generated from a "big bang" or is "finite but without beginning" matters little to Christian theology. Scientific probing and findings need not be censored by religious conviction, and vice versa.

Once again, the phenomenon of surprise offers us a key to the Scriptural insights. Where is that statement amazing? It is certainly not in the conviction that God created Heaven. All religions had something of the sort in which the deity fashioned a home in which to dwell with assorted demi-gods and servants. In many stories, however, the earth was a mistake, a leftover piece of corruption that found its way some distance from Heaven, and bred inhabitants that were unworthy of divine attention. Nothing could be further from the Cristian conviction than this dualism.

The Ultimate Mystery which encompasses all that is, generates both the authentic (Heavenly) realm and the realm of finitude (Earth), both the realm of "spirit" and the realm of "flesh," to use a more updated version of the dualism. In our current one-story universe, the point is that EVERY dimension has its final source in Mystery. Every mundane reality, every sequence of events, both positive and negative, is sustained by nothing other than Mystery. Consequently, all that is, is good as transparent to the Mystery.

What, then, about "Evil?" For centuries theologians have wrestled with the notion of an Almighty Creator alongside the reality of Evil. It seems that either God is not Almighty or is not good; how else could we account for the tragedy, pain, malice, or suffering that is so vividly part of life? Like most apparent paradoxes, this one requires some "unpacking" of terms to make sense. If by "God" we are referring to the ultimate and encompassing Mystery, there is no reason to expect Mystery's workings to meet our criteria for either understanding or goodness. Rather, in the Christian perspective, the Mystery IS the criterion for goodness: whatever discloses our relation to Final Mystery is good, whether it be the activities of a Hitler or the ravages of AIDS or the blooming of daffodils. The notion



of bad behavior belongs in a discussion of ethics and morals, not ontology.

But does this mean that we have to give up our standards of goodness? Not at all. It only means that they are human standards, finite and culturally-influenced, historically inclined and individually prejudiced. My judgments are not finally reliable. Yet they ARE my judgments, and since I cannot have access to the judgments of final Mystery, I live with the consequences of my own. From this perspective, it is possible to acknowledge relativism without lapsing into the anomie pointed out in The Closing of the American Mind by Alan Bloom<sup>9</sup>. We need to develop our standards carefully and thoroughly, and to hold onto them with integrity. But we cannot expect them to exempt us from surprise when forces explicable only as from Mystery do not adhere to them. And when the surprises come, our response of faith is to be one of affirmation. Such is the lesson from Job.

How is this possible?

### III. "AND IN JESUS CHRIST, HIS ONLY SON, OUR LORD"

The story surrounding Jesus of Nazareth has functioned as a preeminent occasion for transforming encounters with Mystery. Nothing in history or sociology quite accounts for it, and even the contemporaries regarded it as a "scandal."

*It started off all wrong. I'd gotten the tickets reserved in time and gotten general directions to the concert hall, but by telephone in mixed languages, was not able to get it pin-pointed closer than a 2-block radius. Oh well, the cab driver will surely know the building – the Old City Hall. Just to be sure, I pushed us to leave with time to spare for searching as well as buying the tickets. So we rushed, a disgusting way to prepare for the English Brass Ensemble.*

*Sure enough, we arrived at an approximate destination, the driver saying as he let us out, "I think it's over there," We went over there to an obviously locked and chained and dark building. Wrong. So we searched, finally locating the auditorium on a side street. It was still 20 minutes before ticket sales began.*

*We were soaked with sweat ("perspiration" is far too mild a term for what the body does while vigorously walking around in a still,*

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987)

*humid, tropical evening; besides, it was sprinkling a light rain). And our dispositions more than matched the circumstances. Each of us was blaming the other for the foul-up, and each was just about ready to chuck it and make our way home. I'd personally consigned the whole affair to perdition where a number of my other good ideas had wound up. Since it was already a total loss, we decided just to wait another five minutes. In that time, they opened, and we got ticketed, seated, and programmed, and we waited.*

*They finally started, the eight of them, with "Trumpet Voluntary." It was magnificent ... flawless ... effortless perfection ... performed as the composer might have dreamed but probably never heard. The concert got better from that opening. An example: in a closing number, the introducer - it was the tuba player's turn - described the up-coming trumpet solo as the most difficult piece ever written for that instrument. It was so hard, he said with a twinkle that they had never performed it, and even had bets among themselves that the soloist couldn't get through it. The soloist looked thoroughly nonplussed. He then stood and worked a miracle of virtuosity, rippling through impossible arpeggios with grace and style. At the end as even the ensemble accompanists were giving a standing ovation, he nodded, smiled, and sat down as though it were all in a day's work.*

*We were transfixed: transported from venial frustration to awe. It isn't that our situation had changed. What had been perplexing wasn't resolved - we didn't even know how we were going to get home - but it didn't matter. We were surprised by an encounter with absolute genius.*

And so it goes. When we are surprised with glimpses of sheer Mystery, we come out different, even if nothing much has changed except our perspective.

Every aspect of the story of Jesus reeks of surprise: the Annunciation, the Virgin Birth, the Angels and Shepherds (boy, were THEY surprised!), the miracles, the sermons, the betrayal, the trial, crucifixion and death, and the resurrection. The way the stories are presented is classically mythological in form, and sometimes also in content. But throughout the Gospels, a major theme was: JESUS SURPRISED PEOPLE. Just when they thought they had life figured out, he said or did something that un-did their expectations. If ever there were a personal embodiment of surprise, it was Jesus of Nazareth (in creedal terms, "HIS ONLY SON.") To the pious he was an ultra-libertine; to the lawless, he was upholder of tradition; to the vengeful, he was the soul of

grace; to the outcast, the proclaimer of triumph; to the establishment, the prophet of doom.<sup>10</sup>

That Mystery disclosed itself through this generally wild and unlovable figure in a definitive way is a surprise – or would be were we not so accustomed to hearing watered-down and romanticized versions of it.

Another shocking fact is that this figure has come to be regarded as “OUR LORD,” i.e., the paradigm of authentic humanness. Human role models are not a strange phenomenon – the Hero figure abounds in cultures and, according to Joseph Campbell, has 1,000 faces<sup>11</sup>. According to Campbell’s analysis, the hero has an identifiable journey, the pattern of which serves as a model of authenticity. But Jesus’ journey as depicted in Scripture was off the mark. In fact, in several significant aspects, it totally contradicted the pattern. It was so contrary to the contemporary Messianic ideal that Jewish culture rejected it outright. But then so would any culture with a hero ideal.

For instance, **“HE SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD AND BURIED.”** Many heroes suffer, and it is not unusual for them to be miracle workers after their return from the center to a life of service. But to be a hero, you’re supposed to overcome the powers that be, not get beaten by them. You’re supposed to outwit them and to bring righteousness, peace and prosperity to the people. You’re NOT supposed to get crucified, dead and buried.

What does it mean to suppose that THIS is the paradigm of authentic humanness? There have been many theories of atonement raised to respond to this question. Most of them, however, explain Jesus as performing a special function on behalf of humankind that would never be required again. (For some, it is taking punishment for our wrongdoings so we do not have to; for others, it is playing the role of the suffering servant; for others. It is winning back cosmic favor for humankind through performing a personal sacrifice.) But in all those theories, the hero’s function as a paradigm of authenticity is lost. They essentially say, “Since Jesus did it, we don’t have to.” And that negates the underlying meaning of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Mathews, “The Christ of History” in John Epps, ed. *Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) p.44

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Campbell *The Hero With 1,000 Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949)

In fact to claim Jesus as Lord is to claim that his life IS the paradigm of humanness. And if the resurrection story is anything more than a fairy tale - or an historical account - it is the proclamation that the Mystery affirms this life as fulfillment itself.

And that means we are in Luther's terms "Little Christs." It is not the veneration of Jesus that constitutes Christian faith; it's the patterning of one's own life after that of Our Lord. Many people understand suffering and even sacrifice to be a part of "the good and holy life;" but rarely, even in our tradition, is cruciformity grasped. Cruciformity as a theological dynamic points to the phenomenon of betrayal by the very cause for and on behalf of which you gave your time, talents, and energy. It means being nailed by the very ones you served. When that happens to us, as it frequently does, we think there must be some mistake - we're supposed to be honored or at least appreciated, NOT despised and rejected. Taking on the role of Jesus' follower has never promised ease, only authenticity and right relationship to Mystery.

#### **IV. THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD. HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND SITTETH AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY. FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD.**

The resurrection is not about the resuscitation of a corpse; it's about the indestructability and transformative power of the dynamic disclosed through surprise - Mystery.

*I encountered the beggar just after a tour of the "Skull Museum" in Phnom Penh. This is a ghastly place in which the torture and execution of thousands of Cambodians took place during the Pol Pot regime. It was a school complex complete with classrooms and dormitories that had been converted first into a dreaded prison, then a torturing and execution facility and more recently into a museum to honor those killed. The citizens of Cambodia decided to keep it not just as a memorial but also as a reminder, "so that nothing like this can happen ever again."*

*The guards were meticulous record-keepers so that the names and dates and photographs of all the victims are recorded. Their skulls have been preserved and are now displayed in the form of a map of the nation.*

*The facility is a horrifyingly normal-looking place that serves to remind you, among other things, of the banality of evil. To stare at rooms in which prisoners attempted suicide to escape the torture, and see there*

*only the meager furniture of a dorm room with a few bloodstains on the floor throws one into contemplation on the human condition and how we manage to escape such unimaginable horrors.*

*So when you leave that place, you're in a somber state of being.*

*I was in no mood to deal with the pitiful beggar who was limping across the street, clearly intending to make a hit on this vulnerable tourist leaving the museum. His limp was the result of land mines laid, probably by my countrymen, during the Viet Nam war. Thousands of Cambodians are missing legs or parts of legs resulting from the mines. So it was not unusual to find limping beggars there. In fact they probably make up a substantial demographic segment.*

*But I was in no spiritual state for an encounter at that time.*

*So, when he limped about three-quarters of the way across the street towards me and attempted to make eye contact, I quickly crossed the street to the side from which he had come. Looking back, I noticed that he had turned around and was continuing pursuit. So again I waited until he was nearly across then I went back to my original side. I noted a slight glimmer of a smile on his face as he turned again to come after me. Once again I waited until there was no danger of meeting in the middle of the street and crossed back towards my destination. This time when I looked back across the street, he was clearly smiling. Then he rendered a snappy salute, which I returned, and we went our separate ways.*

In Scriptures, the resurrection story emphasizes surprise - the women at the tomb, the appearance at a gathering behind locked doors, and Paul's experience en route to Damascus were all occasions when their surprise initiated a new life mission. Clearly, whatever "objective" historians say about the events, something happened that made them realize that death had not stopped the Mysterious dimension of life from persistence. The instigator of surprise - the occasioner of Mystery is not only alive and well, but of equal stature to the "Father" and is the standard for assessment of reality.

The Biblical story is set in the world view of the time with a multi-story universe, an impending end of history, and an anthropological Supreme Being ruling over all like a king. In the story the life of Jesus was elevated to the epitome of Mystery, and every life will be measured by its standard.

It's important to go into a little detail here. I do not mean to say that unless you are executed unjustly, you are living inauthentically. Nor

am I contending that everybody has to be a nomadic healer and counterculture preacher or monk. The lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth as depicted in the Gospels was one of unlimited affirmation of reality, opposing every illusion – about Mystery, about life, about society, about self.

In confronting that affirmation – even in hearing about it – our own denials are shaken and we have the possibility of adopting that stance. Once we do, we find that others are surprised, addressed and sometimes transformed by their encounter with us. Once we get past the initial shock of being affirmed and start affirming, it's heady stuff, and easy to get sidetracked. Many do, and go off into rewarding careers as healers of one sort or another. Others remain bearers of shocking affirmation, and eventually get nailed. At that point comes the test (The "Last Temptation of Christ" according to Nikos Kazantzakis): Is THIS Mystery "My God and Father?" On our response to that existential question hangs the final judgment of our life.

In this schema, it is the refusal of surprise that is the essence of sin, for that is rejection of Mystery. Failing to live up to the standards of affirmation set by the paradigmatic figure of Jesus, again, is more a matter of ethics than soteriology. The depth of sin is denying, rejecting, and insulating oneself from surprise. To the extent that one succeeds in banishing surprise from life, to that extent is one dead (The "wages of sin," you know). Surprising encounters with Mystery generate vitality. Routine kills, both spirit and body. Jesus as the paradigmatic bearer of surprise overcomes sin and its consequences by driving out our lethargy and re-opening us to the invigorating drama, astonishment, joy and terror of life before the Mystery.

## ***V. I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH***

When I speak of the Holy Spirit, I'm referring to the Mysterious connectedness that obtains among people and groups of the most astonishing diversity. I'm not talking about a magical, tongue-speaking, faith-healing, fire-walking possession, or of an ectoplasmic flame to be induced to overcome untoward circumstances.

*It was a lunchtime break during a seminar in Malaysia. A number of us were sitting around the table chatting, and I asked a senior manager seated across from me if her name meant "Victory" in Hindi.*

*"Yes," she remarked, "Vijaya is usually followed by 'Lakshmi' or 'Kali' or one of the other gods. We have quite a few gods related to victory, and people are named for various ones of them. When we go to the temple, we pay attention especially to the one that relates to our name."*

*"I've always wondered," remarked a Chinese manager, "how you manage to teach your children moral values. Do you have something like Sunday School like we do in Christianity, where kids can go and learn about the values? I sometimes think I'm not doing enough for my children because we don't go to church regularly."*

*"We don't have that kind of teaching in Hinduism. We don't have a single book like the Koran or the Bible or the teachings of Buddha. There are so many stories. My children actually get the stories of the gods from comics. The Ramayana stories used to be on TV. And I try to relate them to the Power Rangers – they're always changing shape and exercising their power."*

*"When I was a boy," remarked another senior manager, "I was the only one from a Thai Buddhist family in a neighborhood of Malay Muslims. All my friends went to Mosque. I ran around playing with them, and when it was time for Mosque, I waited for them and then we ran around some more."*

*"This is really remarkable," I observed. "Malaysia has something to teach the rest of the world. Here we are at lunch having a casual conversation that includes a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, and a Christian, and it seems perfectly normal."*

*"Yes," continued the Thai Buddhist. "We were the only Buddhist family in our neighborhood. I remember the time all my friends went through circumcision. I wondered why, and they said it was a ritual. So I waited with them for a week while they recovered, then we went back to running around again. When a monk would come to visit us, all the boys in the village knew he was coming to our place because it was the only Thai style house around, so they would bring him to us."*

*"We were brought up with differences. At home I had to speak Thai with my parents. But with all my Malay friends, I had to speak Bahasa Malaysia. Then my father sent me to a Chinese school so I had to speak Mandarin; but also to play with other kids, I had to learn Hokkien and Hakka dialects. Now I also speak a little Japanese. It's helpful to know several languages."*

*All this was recounted in perfect English.*

*Back to the Malaysian Indian: "I took a trip to India recently, and it was shocking to see all the poverty. I thought about it for a long*



*time and finally began to understand the viciousness of the well-to-do. It's to stay out of the sea of poverty that surrounds them. People will do anything to stay away from it. But there are very wealthy people and very intelligent people. And of course people think deeply about why conditions are like they are, so philosophy is a major preoccupation. I went to the Ganges and actually went into the water. Everyone was doing it, and it felt good like washing your sins away."*

*Sometimes you wonder why "ethnic differences" are the supposed occasion for such violence in the world. They can also be occasions of great delight. It's an honor to encounter this fact in practice.*

In the 1980's, the world became clear about the issue of diversity. Prior to that time, we had been separated by physical, economic, and cultural barriers that made real contact among people of substantial differences tolerably rare. But in the 80's the walls came tumbling down. Electronics, communications, and transportation advances brought us together as one world to a degree not seen before. Economic links were obvious and powerful; cultural and political barriers tumbled as more people travelled and studied and worked outside their own enclaves. As a globe, we discovered several notable realities, a significant one of which was that: people really ARE different.

That occasioned a crisis. How can you relate to someone whose principal values are anathema to you? The old liberal assumption that people are really the same crumbled under the weight of an inescapable diversity. Some reacted by a relativism that refused to honor ANY values since all were obviously culturally conditioned. Others adopted fanaticism, excluding those of different persuasions from any respect.

The astonishing fact is that the globe did NOT erupt into chaos. A strange reconciliation occurred and people sometimes found themselves able to work together despite disagreements on virtually every issue. There seems to be a drive towards relationship within the human species. The most fundamental fact of humanness is perhaps not individuality but relation

When groups come together around a common cause, a spirit emerges that transcends individual differences and allows for synergy to occur. It is a fragile phenomenon, this relatedness, and easy to be lost in bureaucratic procedures, petty disputes, or self-seeking. It seems to come and go at its own pace with little we can do to control it. But all group rituals and regulations and standards are attempts to nurture this spirit, even to evoke it. And they remind us of its reality when we seem to forget. Sometimes they work; sometimes the rituals and common

practices themselves become substitutes for that to which they point, and then they have to be revised.

Groups, whether political, economic, or cultural seem to share a common journey. They begin with a cause, a mission that is vivid, compelling and attractive. In this phase, they are high-spirited enthusiastic, victorious. In time, the purpose fades, and the practices that functioned to mobilize the group to serve its purpose become elevated to a position of top priority. Then bureaucracy and ritualism take over, and the dimension of uniting spirit fades. People isolate themselves in their own small segments of the whole with little tolerance for alternate opinions or actions. The group is then ripe for eruption. It occurs in two ways. On the one hand, a schism may occur. In that case, one faction separates from the rest, claiming purity for itself over against the corruption of the main body. While the schismatics may for a while retain something of the original spirit the tendency is for their self-righteousness to produce mean-spirited results. They often end up worse than their origins.

On the other hand, the entire group may encounter a reformation. A new clarity of mission and purpose may emerge, perhaps, but not necessarily around a new leader, and new forms may emerge to facilitate the new clarity and spirit. This three-step journey (origin - crisis - reorganization) seems to be the destiny of every group, whatever its basis.

Every group relies on the Mystery of connectedness for its sustenance, and that Spirit cannot be manipulated. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to trust this reality in the midst of organizational ebbs and flows.

The term "CHURCH" is perhaps the least precise in the creed. In common parlance, it may refer to the building on the corner, to a large institution with officers and resources and power, to a group of people with particular religious beliefs, or to a 2,000 year old religious movement.

All are realities, but different claims may be made for each. The Ancients have dealt with the puzzling phenomenon by coining such terms as "The Church Militant and the Church Triumphant;" "The Visible and the Invisible Church;" "The Church Gathered and the Church Dispersed;" and more recently, "The Institution and the Movement."

One can hardly regard the building on the corner and the people who use it as HOLY (transparent to Mystery) and CATHOLIC (universal). They are quite obviously finite and particular. But if you try to refine the church in terms more fittingly Holy and Catholic, then you

get into an intolerable abstractionism, an idealism the implications of which are that the church has never and will never exist.

The surprise is precisely this: those totally finite, corruptible groups of misfits who occasionally gather in buildings with a peculiar architecture ARE in some sense an embodiment of a universal and altogether sacred reality. They are the living embodiment of surprise (the "Body of Christ") who exist to pioneer a faithful relationship with Mystery.

Their rituals and songs and studies and actions all intend to make visible the reality of Mystery and embody confidence in the midst of surprise. They don't always understand that purpose and don't always remain faithful to their mission. Like any organization, they are subject to the three-stage life process, repeated over and over. Yet even in the crisis stage, their presence is used by Mystery to manifest itself and to promote fidelity.

The implications of this view are clear: never can the church claim for itself a status above that of secular society: it is part and parcel of society and subject to sociological forces. Yet its function is unique: to be the pioneer in society of a more authentic reality.<sup>12</sup> So neither can it be simply subject to society. As charged to pioneer and to manifest Mystery, it often calls into question society whenever structures or assumptions obscure the ultimate reality to which all are subject. But it can never claim ultimate wisdom about how things should be organized, nor can it claim special privileges or stature as "rightful ruler of society." This group is the perpetuator of the question, making always clear that whatever answers are available are used to benefit society, but never allowing temporal answers to obscure ultimate surprise.

This is important, because many have used this function of the Church as an excuse for railing out against structures, policies, and practices that fail to live up to their favorite ideal. That's not disclosing Mystery, it's witnessing to ideals. The disclosure of Mystery calls for not only posing questions about inadequate assumptions and practices, but also offering alternatives. It does not, for example, disclose the Mystery inherent in differences simply to oppose racial segregation. Genuine disclosure of Mystery requires demonstration of a desegregated group in which differences are dealt with. Failing in this second step of disclosure, many groups persist in self-righteous aloofness, demanding of others

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<sup>12</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society." In K.S. Larouette, ed. *The Gospel, The Church and the World* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1946) pp 111-133.

solutions that they themselves have no intention of developing. Being “in but not of the world” requires of the Church, when it identifies practices that obscure Mystery’s presence, not only to point them out, but also to investigate their origin and function, and to develop resolutions that effectively resolve both the old and the new issues.<sup>13</sup> It means involvement in the ambiguities and compromises of the world, not clinging to the purity of abstract ideals.

As developments in knowledge and culture occur, a group of people leads in the act of accommodating faithfully to the newly-disclosed reality. As often as not, it’s done unwittingly. But that group, appearing in large institutions, in peculiar buildings, in unstructured situations and sometimes in ascetic communities, is holy and catholic.

This group always has a sociological form. There is no such thing as a formless movement. But the form is not the point. It, like every other feature of the group, exists to disclose Mystery, to point beyond itself to the Ultimate. The hierarchical structures were invented as visible manifestations of the cosmology of the time; one looked at the organization of the Church and saw through it to the sovereign reign of Mystery. Later the Presbyteries of Calvin and the Conferences of Wesley were reflections of the equality of humankind before a sovereign Mystery. We are still struggling to invent the form adequate to reflect ultimate Mystery in a time of quantum mechanics and chaos theory.

One always needs to respect the forms and structures assumed by the pioneering people of Mystery. A degree of temporal loyalty to them is appropriate. But never can we mistake that form for the Ultimate Reality to which it points, for that is the substance of idolatry.

## **VI. “... THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS...”**

“THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS” points to the fact that we remain in relationship with all our contacts, whether they’re physically present or not.

*It was probably the rituals. I can’t think of what else could have built the cohesion that was so manifest at our 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion. We certainly did not get to know each other very well during college years. Nor have most of us stayed in touch. But our 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion at The*

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<sup>13</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Church as Social Pioneer” *ibid.*

*Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina showed a relationship among us that was startling. After graduation my life took a different turn as I went to Perkins Theological Seminary and followed a definitely non-military career path. But the camaraderie with classmates remains alive and well.*

*I have to admit to low expectations for this, the first class reunion I've attended. I had thought the event would, at best, be an occasion for polite greetings among strangers with some reminiscences about times past. But on walking in the door I was greeted with a totally unanticipated recognition, warmth, and welcome that far surpassed anything merited by circumstances.*

*It's hard to describe: It was like finding a lost band of brothers; after the event, I visited my brother, and the relations at the reunion were equal to familial ones.*

*Fifty years had passed since college, so there was no sense of competition or status-seeking. We'd all become who and what we are. And it was received as good.*

*Probably the rituals of life at the Citadel were the welding torch that shaped this diverse group of people into the Class of '61. We assembled and marched to all meals at which someone led a prayer of blessing. We awoke and went to sleep to the sound of a bugle. Every Friday afternoon we held a dress parade. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons were drills. Every Saturday was a formal inspection. Every Sunday, chapel was compulsory. We all dressed alike. And we saluted those in official positions. When you have a group that goes through this for four years, their unity tends to last.*

*We didn't attempt to understand the rituals nor what they symbolized, so their impact was not self-conscious. And perhaps for that reason they were effective. And they left us with some habits barely recognized - like always wearing black sox or hanging your shirts always facing to the left or always starting to walk with the left foot first.*

*At the reunion, we were even able to pass in review during the dress parade in our honor. We lined up and, led by our former regimental commander and more or less in step, marched to the reviewing stand, some of us preceded by sizeable stomachs overhanging belts. Then we halted, turned to the right, and saluted General Rosa, president of the college. That would have been quite a contrast to the corps of 2000 cadets who had just gone by in their precise drill formation, even a comedic parody of the parade.*

*But people in the reviewing stands applauded us as we went by.  
That got to me.*

We're never alone, even in our most solitary situations. Each of us lives in constant dialogue with those who have influenced us, whether alive or dead, whether fictional or real. In our sub-conscious, every meeting is retained and exerts an influence on us. Each of us has the potential to carry on a conscious dialogue with our internal mentors<sup>14</sup>.

It's as if a council of advisors were convened inside the mind, constantly giving advice in every situation. We always select those to whom we will listen and those whom we will ignore. Productive times of meditation consist NOT in emptying consciousness, but in focusing attention on our mental counselors. We add to their number every time we meet people or read, and can be selective in who we let into the group.<sup>14</sup>

Surprisingly, our relationship to the group of "Saints" undergoes several stages. First one is attracted to those with an apparently common outlook. Sooner or later one comes face to face with the unfathomable otherness of one's friends. At this second stage, when it seems absolutely certain that nothing can save the relationship, sometimes a third stage occurs: it becomes possible to remain affirmative, even affectionate towards the others. In the occasions where this occurs, an unbreakable bond is established based on sheer Mystery. This bond does not depend on feelings of warmth which, if they occur, are added benefits. It depends on retaining one's perspective in Mystery: all that is, is finite; all that is, is good. The "Communion of Saints" is this bonding-through-Mystery that allows human beings to remain related to one another.

"THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS" is a startling concept: the idea that violating stipulated rules of life, operating contrary to the way life is, and rebelling against reality need not carry ultimate condemnation goes against the grain. The point is not that behavior does not have consequences: it does. Nor is it that it makes no difference what we do since everything is finally accepted. The point about forgiveness is that it disposes of regrets over the past and opens the future; no longer need we worry about consequences - they're in the hands of Mystery; our attention can focus on the future.

In the view of contemporary physicists and philosophers, we are all related. No facet of existence is solitary or separate. And everything that anyone does affects all the rest. As one put it, the draft from wings of a butterfly on one side of the earth helps to cause a tornado on the other

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<sup>14</sup> See Joseph W. Mathews, "Meditation" *Bending History* op. cit, pp. 116ff.

side. Similarly our every action creates a widening circle of impact like ripples from a stone tossed into a pond, most of which we never know or intend. Inevitably, some of the impacts of even our most carefully considered and charitable actions create pain and suffering for some that we never know. To live consciously in a related world is to live with the fact of creating harm for others.

Placing blame is futile. In a real sense, each of us is to blame for whatever happens. Causality is multiple and complex. To be sure, there needs to be a distinction between deliberate acts of malice and unforeseen consequences of "normal" behavior. But to the sufferer, the distinction is irrelevant: the pain is the same. Furthermore, placing blame tends to circumscribe the responsibility of the actor for his/her action. It is to say that I will assume responsibility for only those consequences of my actions that I can foresee and control. This is an extraordinary blindness which leads to unconscionable pride.

The alternative - accepting responsibility for ALL the consequences of one's actions - means that one acknowledges guilt, even though particular details were unintended. This guilt may or may not be felt psychologically; it is none the less real.

In Asian cultures, guilt is far less a conscious trait than in the West. In Asia, shame is the issue. Through counter-productive acts, one experiences shame, i.e., loss of face through dis-honoring one's community. Whereas guilt in the West is highly individualized, shame in the East is more communal. Whatever the subjective experience of inauthentic behavior, forgiveness declares that objective consequences are transformed.

When one is "forgiven" then one has the capacity to live with the reality of sin, guilt, and shame without being paralyzed or destroyed by them. Mythically speaking, the universe is run by Mystery, not by people; so Mystery takes over our deeds and their consequences and uses them as grist for the civilizing process. The negativity of the consequences is negated. We may be no better than before, but history continues on its journey, unimpeded. Humankind has unimaginable capacities to screw things up; yet Mystery generates unaccountable wonders out of our messes. That's the surprise of forgiveness.

All the above presupposes an understanding of "sin" as something deeper than deliberate violations of codes of conduct. These violations may manifest a deeper reality, but cannot be equated to it. "Sin" in this schema consists of violating the relatedness that exists among finite participants of the cosmos. "Forgiveness" consists of having that relatedness sustained despite its brokenness.

Our experience of radical diversity has disclosed the relativism of rules. No one can rightfully claim universal authority for a particular set of behavioral standards. But does this fact mean there are no guidelines? Of course not. Guidelines abound, and the fact that they are finite and conditioned by their historical and cultural and geographic environments does not make them less serious.

Rules are conditions of group membership. Groups have the right and responsibility to make and enforce their rules. To belong to a group is to subject oneself to its rules, its rewards and punishments. It's like the old Country Music song which proclaims "If You're Gonna Play in Texas, You Gotta Have a Fiddle in the Band."<sup>15</sup> Of course you don't have to play in Texas, but if you do.... Rules are finite but real guides to authentic living in community, but violations of a community's rules is not itself sin, whether that community is cultural, religious, family, voluntary, or national.

The epitome of Sin is a single-valued orientation that denies alternative values and perspectives and claims absolutism for itself. This is fanaticism, whether quietly or overtly practiced. It is a rejection of the Mystery of diversity, a denial of reality. Lately a new fanatic form has emerged – anomie. Rather than contend against diverse standards, one opts for none and fanatically clings to the proposition that nothing matters, that all perspectives are equal. This too is a denial of reality. In these instances, forgiveness consists of reality's constant intrusion into our denials. We may flee from surprise, and that is sin. But we cannot escape it, and that is forgiveness.

The question is "What constitutes authentic living?" The thesis of this work is that living before Mystery in the face of constant surprise with a nonchalant passion is the heart of human fulfillment.

## ***VII. "THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING"***

It is virtually impossible to think of our own death with equanimity. Even though it is the most obvious and universal of facts, coming to terms with our demise is traumatic. It seems to cast a pall over all that goes before. It seems that even our loftiest moments are robbed of significance if when we die, we're really dead. The converse is also true:

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<sup>15</sup> Murray Kellum and Dan Mitchell, and recorded by American country music band Alabama.



unless there is some final reckoning beyond the grave, why bother to behave? Why not “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die?”

*It was the first of February, 1982, when I went hesitantly into the doctor’s office for the results of some recent tests. “I have some bad news for you,” were his opening words, and with that comment, the bottom dropped out of my world.*

*It’s not that I was unprepared. In the past six months, I had lost 25 pounds from an already slender 140-pound frame. In the bath I found muscles and bones that were totally unfamiliar. What’s worse, my concentration had been slipping and my eyesight blurring, I was constantly thirsty, and a host of other symptoms had triggered my going in for a physical. I reckoned that it could be cancer, heart disease, encephalitis, leukemia, meningitis, leprosy, or some obscure tropical malady.*

*While waiting a week for the test results, I had been preparing for the worst. How to tell Ann? What arrangements to make for the final days? Whether or not to return to the States? Is my will in order? Will I have a long, final hospital stay or a short, messy collapse? Would I prefer burial or cremation? Would my organs be suitable for donation? Can I select the music and ritual for the funeral? What should I propose for my epitaph? Each of these questions had been considered in turn and each had a tentative answer while awaiting news from the tests.*

*So when the doctor opened with his comment, the bottom fell out, despite my preparations. Then he continued, “You have diabetes.” And he looked curious that I was laughing.*

*It was serious, no doubt, but hardly the sort of bad news for which I’d been preparing. It was as if a load were lifted, a reprieve granted. In walking back to get a book on the disease and how to manage it, the birds were singing and the tropical smells, glorious. Now I had news for Ann, but not nearly the sort of news I dreaded. This would be the start of a new lifestyle. And so it was.*

Concepts of death have been fashioned on the one hand, to posit ultimate significance to human endeavors, and on the other hand to provide deterrence against anti-social activities. These are positive and negative incentive eschatologies. Curiously, both versions assume that humans are fundamentally incapable of virtue in se. They (we) have to be cajoled or threatened into living authentically.

But what of the science of the matter? At this point we’ve not advanced beyond the ancients: we don’t know. We know that certain body parts can function in hosts other than their origin when their original user dies; we also know certain parts can die without killing their

host. But what of consciousness? Do "I" persist in some way after my body shuts down? Nobody knows. But even were we to discover conclusively that death is merely a transition to another state of being, that "fact" would have nothing to do with the creed's affirmation: science and religion deal with different concerns.

Let's for a moment "unpack" the belief that if death is final, life is not significant. To whom is it not significant? Perhaps what I do today may not be significant to me in 50 years since I will no longer be around. But I'm not the measure of my significance - only the recipient of it. The significance of today's actions is measured in terms of their contribution to history, their benefit to the whole of reality. And that benefit stands whether I or indeed anyone recognizes it. Life simply IS significant. One's life expenditure "belongs" to Mystery, not to oneself. Nothing could provide more lasting meaning than participation in Ultimate Reality.

Similarly regarding punishment. Suppose that living inauthentically, i.e., in denial of Mystery, flight from surprise and negation of community, brings the consequence of - inauthentic life. Sulphur and brimstone could add little to the pain of attempts to be what one is not or to escape from what one is. Perhaps being inhuman seems enjoyable, but in those cases, human fulfillment is forfeited. It's hard to see what a post mortem Hell would add to the pre-mortem self-destruction that is inevitably consequent on inauthentic behavior.

Maybe it's just our sense of retributive justice that is offended if imposed rewards and punishments cannot be anticipated. But our sense of justice is not the measure of reality. It may even be a mask of our inhumanity, this wish for a Rambo-like revenge on wrongdoers.

So what does it mean to believe in (i.e. rely on with certainty) THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING?

Let's look back at the Gospels. Their story told of the physical resurrection of Jesus' corpse. And although some physical properties were altered in later versions to accommodate "appearances" in closed rooms, it was recognizably Jesus who ON THE THIRD DAY ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD. And what does this mean?

The writers clearly intended more than chronicling a historical curiosity. According to Paul, unless this is true, our faith is in vain.

But assume for a moment that it IS true: so what? Innumerable historical singularities have occurred that bear little relationship to me. Yet this belief became the cornerstone of the Christian proclamation. What was it that this story communicated that bridged the gap of time and space to address us today? What do we believe in as the

“resurrection of the body?” First, we believe the Mystery whom we acknowledge in life is no less sovereign and active in death.

Secondly, we believe that this Mystery was manifested in the life of Jesus as the Christ.

Thirdly, we believe that Jesus’ life was elevated (raised up) as a model of human fulfillment and authenticity. It was his BODY, not just his spirit that was so raised up. Human fulfillment has nothing to do with denial of the natural body.

Fourthly, we believe that the Jesus model is valid beyond its cultural and temporal and geographical habitat. It is the eternal measure of authenticity, whether one be Aboriginal, desert nomad, slum dweller, Asian or Western suburbanite, urban sophisticate or solitary Eskimo.

This does not mean the Western missionaries have the right to impose cultural norms from their interpretation of Scripture onto other peoples. It DOES mean that the Jesus model of affirmation/appreciation/love of reality and opposition to illusion and escapism is the fulfillment of human potential – even if it kills us.

Finally, we believe that no mutation, evolution, disasters or developments will alter this truth. The life portrayed here is everlasting. And to the extent that I participate in it, I take part in everlasting life.

It’s tough shaking off attachments to “sweet bye and bye” incentive eschatologies. It’s human to indulge in visions of future bliss and compensation for present afflictions. But that human hope for reward is not the highest human hope possible. One can be attached to something other than one’s own elevation. One can be attached to that which persists beyond my self, to the lasting truth about life, to the Ultimate Reality, Mystery.

And who knows what will happen when we die? No doubt it will be our greatest surprise.

## **Conclusion**

*In the early months of 1988, Manila was a stimulating place to live. With a major national election approaching, the gold, guns, and goons were increasingly active. This time there was also an undercurrent of discontent bordering on despair among members of the establishment. To that pre-election madness, add the Filipino propensity for showmanship, and you have the formula for chaos.*

*As if the ambience were not unsettling enough, our unit was going through a schism without good will on either side, and I was*

*assigned to get it resolved to the benefit of the "angels." Furthermore, our lease had just expired and we were house hunting.*

*At the best of times, Manila is unsettling, Traffic is snarled; the air is toxic; the water is deadly; the mosquitoes are malarial; the telephones work sporadically; and the weather is stifling.*

*I loved it.*

*The simplest activities – buying a loaf of bread – brought about encounters with immensely creative people, and enough adventures to last a lifetime. It makes for life on the edge – adrenalin seems a dietary staple – along with fish heads, rice, and blood soup. A few months of this and you get caught up in the maelstrom.*

*One day in the midst of the frenetic pace of the city we stopped at a Mexican restaurant in the heart of Makati's Green Belt, and the world stopped. It was dark and cool; quiet background music; cold drinks and ample tasty food. It was an oasis, and not just physically. It was a place where you could pause, reflect, feel at home, regain perspective, and recover the sheer mad wonder of it all.*

*We dubbed it "The Sanctuary of Tia Maria."*

These pages are admittedly incomplete. There is far more to be said about the Christian Faith and the depths of its relevance to contemporary life than I have touched. And no doubt, there is even more that I do not yet understand. So regard these pages as incomplete but perhaps provocative, the awarenesses of a person on the way. My intent has been to indicate a window through which to grasp the meaning of the faith, and to point out some of what I see from that viewpoint. Please have a look, and then see if you can improve the view. Perhaps we'll both be surprised. The scenery is fantastic.

## **Chapter Two**

# **Mystery and the Universe: Cosmology and Culture**

## Introduction

What follows is a series of reviews of other publications. I read quite a lot in both fiction and non-fiction, the latter tending towards science. While I have little formal education in that field, the findings of astrophysics fascinate me, especially since they shape our world-view. The implications of chaos theory and string theory have not yet been developed, but they are sure to be profound. While I do not pretend to understand them, still they hold a real intrigue.

Occasionally, however, I find some of the writers overstepping their bounds and venturing into theology. This generally irritates me to the extent that I put pen to paper (actually fingers to keyboard) and draft a response. Finally I have to thank these writers for provoking me to clarify some assumptions.

Two of the articles below consist of responses to work done by Steven Hawking, the brilliant physicist at Cambridge who currently holds the chair that once belonged to Isaac Newton. He has overcome affliction with ALS and furthered the boundaries of science to a considerable degree. His ventures into theology, however, leave much to be desired.

The third article is an appreciative response to the book of a friend, Bishop Yap Kim Hao of the Methodist Church in Singapore. He addresses directly the fact of religious diversity which is an occasioning influence of this book. We share similar concerns, though our approach to them differs slightly.

The fourth article is a reflection on the theology of Joseph W. Mathews, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute/Institute of Cultural Affairs with whom I worked for a number of years and from whom I learned much about the practicality of the Christian Faith.

The final article is in response to a lecture given at a global gathering of the Institute of Cultural Affairs by Dr. Joseph Van Arendonk in which he raised the question for those engaged in development, "What is man?" My response was an attempt to articulate a response to the question that represents the perspective of ICA in its development efforts around the world.

## Maker of Heaven and Earth

Stephen W. Hawking has done us a great favor in publishing A Brief History of Time<sup>16</sup>. He has made available to the layman the latest thinking about astrophysics and cosmology in a form that, if incomprehensible, is at least accessible to anyone. The book has even made it to No.2 on the best-seller lists in Kuala Lumpur (right behind Love and Marriage by Bill Cosby).

He has given us the occasion to grasp something of the nature of the universe as perceived by the most analytical of sciences, theoretical physics. His explanations are clever, analogical, clear and even witty, no small feat for a man "unlucky enough" to be afflicted with motor neuron disease (ALS). So we are introduced to weak energy, naked singularities, black holes, big bangs, antimatter, imaginary time, and other theoretical concepts that stretch the mind and explain observed phenomena.

He also raises questions for theology, rather deliberately and even mischievously. He spells out his contention that the universe is indeed finite but also boundless (i.e. without beginning or end), and goes on to suggest that this has profound implications for the role of God as creator (p. 149). He also posits that were we to discover a complete unified theory that explains how creation occurred, then we might pursue the question "Why?" the answer to which would enable us to know the mind of God (p.185).

It seems to him that classical theology has been able to adapt itself to the findings of cosmologists so long as something like a "big bang" were posited. This seems to coincide nicely with notions of God as creator. Hawking cited the Pope as making this comment at a council of cosmologists at the Vatican (p. 122). But as he reminded us, knowledge has grown so enormously in the past century that philosophers are largely unacquainted with theoretical physics.

So also is the reverse true: physicists appear to be unfamiliar with the work of contemporary theology. It has been quite a long time since God was seriously conceived in such a way that required a "big bang" or any other scientific singularity, to be taken seriously. "Most people," he says, "have come to believe that God allows the universe to evolve according to a set of laws and does not intervene in the universe to break these laws." (149) That may have been a true statement a century ago, but it hardly describes "most people" today. Hawking's comments

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time: from the Big Bang to Black Holes (New York: Bantam Books, 1988)

presuppose a notion of God outside of and distinct from the Universe. Except for the most rabid fundamentalists, that notion was laid to rest even before the Soviet Cosmonaut remarked that up in the sky, he didn't see God. The three-story universe no longer exists for religion any more than it does for physics. So shall we suppose Hawking was poking fun at believers, challenging us to make sense of our beliefs? Or was it a rhetorical device designed to suggest profound implications at hand?

Whatever his intent, his notion of God as creator misfires.

The God who is maker of heaven and earth is not a superman in another dimension. Nor is God simply the answer when science or any other human enquiry runs into its boundaries.

So what does it mean to declare "I believe in God...maker of Heaven and Earth?"

One may approach the question several ways; I would like to try the phenomenological / existential approach. That way the relevance of the assertion will be apparent without going through the step of applying metaphysical verities to life as lived. Besides, the metaphysical job has been done by S. M. Ogden and Charles Hartshorne<sup>17</sup> who have articulated a panentheism that overcomes the difficulties in classical theism that gave rise to the problems Hawking raises.

Life as experienced is multidimensional. "This world" and "the other world" have been metaphors for this experience from time immemorial. Like most metaphors, they're absurd when taken literally, but analogically they illumine reality. One lives in the midst of ordinariness, routine, physical activity, mental effort. One makes money, friends, work, love, and enemies; one eats and drinks, studies, writes, plays the radio, works on computers, builds houses, and all other things that constitute living in this century. To declare "this world" of commonplace activity to be made by God is to say it is significant, infinitely significant, not simply because it's our own unique and unrepeatable experience, but simply because it IS. No activity and no life, however common, escapes profound value. There is meaning in the midst of the struggles of life, a meaning not simply dependent on our grasping it, for often we do not.

We also notice that our actions have consequences beyond themselves, and far beyond our intentions. To perform an action is to set loose a chain of events the repercussions of which are quite

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960)



unpredictable. The name for that which governs these outcomes is "God." So naming the controlling factor in history is to declare significance to the course of events. Mythologically, one may say that God's creation is continuing, being constantly constituted out of mundane events in which we participate. One could also describe the phenomenon as guided by "laws," but this is to imply a degree of predictability that is absent and to omit the dimension of significance that is surely implied by our continuing to function in so unpredictable a world.

But there is another dimension of life, the experience of awe, wonder, terror, fascination, dread, and mystery. There is the consciousness of unlimited obligation and boundless guilt, of unlimited freedom and ultimate powerlessness, the sense of ultimate destiny and fulfillment, yet the dread of impending doom. These are experiences beyond ordinary emotions; they are the stuff of inspiration, of insight, of humor, of paradigm shifts. Perhaps they can be explained by brain research as alpha or beta waves or right-brain activity, but they occur, and when they occur, it is as if one were gripped from outside oneself. One does not manipulate oneself into a state of appreciation or wonder; one "falls" into it as if into "another world." To declare "heaven" as made by God is to say this dimension is significant. It is not mistaken to experience terror or mystery or obligation or wonder or awe. It is significant in an ultimate sense that goes beyond our own capacity to generate. To attribute this "other world" to God is to declare its profound meaning beyond ourselves.

The tendency is to opt for one or the other of the "worlds" as our home. The mystics choose the "other," and pragmatists fasten onto "this world." This practice distorts reality. In fact the two "worlds" interpenetrate each other; one sometimes experiences profound awe in washing dishes, just as sometimes in the midst of an exhilarating symphonic concert when spirits are soaring, one has to go to the toilet. The constant shifting between "worlds" constitutes authentic life. H. Richard Niebuhr has described how one's participation in "The Other World" provides perspective that enhances participation in "This World."<sup>18</sup> To practice a one-sided focus is tantamount to denying God's creation of them both.

The genius of the doctrine of creation is its declaration of the universality of profound significance. To declare God as creator of

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<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Towards a New Otherworldliness" Theology Today, April, 1944 pp. 78-87

Heaven AND Earth is to affirm the profound significance of every dimension of life. There's nowhere to go to get away from it. One has little control over either the particularity of ordinary experience or of the moments of profound awe. "They're made by God."

This line of thinking seems to make "God" refer to the boundary of human control, that over which we have no power. Formally that is proper but it lacks material definition. To regard "God" as merely the boundary of experience is no better than to regard God as the boundary of science. It will lead to the same absurdities that Hawking described when psychology or medicine reaches the theoretical level of physics: these realms of science will continue to push back the frontiers of understanding so that one day we MAY be able virtually to control our experiences. Yogis have demonstrated incredible capacities for mental and physical control, and surely someday science will get to the bottom of it. Whatever we mean by our belief in "God" as creator, it is not something that can be disproved or set aside by scientific discoveries about life. The meaning of the doctrine lies in a realm different from the physical.

The realm is the arena of significance, the realm of the why, the dimension of consciousness that deals with value. It is a "realm" because experiences of value and significance are not purely subjective, culturally conditioned or emotional. They correspond to aspects of reality; they are experienced because they are there to be experienced. That which gives this dimension its being is ...God.

God is materially defined as Being Itself, the Ground of Being (Tillich), Mystery. We literally participate in being, i.e., the life of God, much as cells participate in our own body, indeed constitute it. Ride this image far enough and you come up with something like this:

We experience ourselves participating in a cosmic drama, the scope of which goes beyond our capacity to fathom. Our mundane activities and our experiences of depth both afford occasional glimpses of profound value. We neither originated nor can we control the complex wholeness of the drama, but we are given the opportunity to play significant roles in it, roles that affect its outcome.

Or, to put it more traditionally, "I believe in God...maker of Heaven and Earth." And whether that creation occurred in a big bang or is infinite and boundless counts neither for nor against that belief.

So, Dr. Hawking, your readers are grateful for your brilliant capacity to bring highly technical insights to us. No doubt they are re-

shaping our basic understanding of reality and assisting us to participate more adequately in God's on-going creation.

## Reflections on "*The Grand Design*"<sup>19</sup>

Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow have undertaken to challenge the "Intelligent Design" theory of creation with the latest science from Quantum Physics and the M-Theory. In my opinion, they deserve each other. Proponents of Intelligent Design say an intelligent being created and runs the cosmos. Scientists who espouse Quantum Physics and M-Theory say no such being is necessary to account for reality as we know it scientifically.

Neither "side" seems aware of the distinction between faith statements as expressive vs. faith statements as explanatory. The former occurs in rituals, creeds, worship, and hymns and is primarily intended to express one's interior posture of affirmation. Faith expressions are poetic and not intended to be taken as literal. Faith explanations can be found in theological formulations that attempt to provide a rational understanding of that posture. Theological formulations are intended to be taken literally and tend to provide a viable model of reality ("model-dependent realism" is the mode of Hawking and Mlodinow) which is compatible with contemporary scientific understanding.

The Intelligent Design movement misses this distinction and tends to take expressive statements as literal, sometimes even missing the deep truth they express. The scientists also miss the distinction and wind up creating a straw man which they demolish with considerable relish and humor.

The book, however, is a useful history of scientific achievement, and filled with informative and entertaining graphics. When compared with the works of Brian Greene<sup>20</sup>, the book seems a bit simplistic; still it's a useful introduction to the present state of physics.

Particularly interesting is its perspective of "model-dependent realism." Instead of attempting to establish the external reality of anything outside of the viewer, it says that what we perceive is shaped by the brain which uses a model to coordinate and make sense of our perceptions. Whether or not the model accords with some external reality is beyond the possibility of establishing. Instead one establishes the

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2012)

<sup>20</sup> See his *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), *The Fabric of the Cosmos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), *The Hidden Reality* (New York: Penguin, 2011). He also has fascinating presentations on TV, the Discovery Channel.

usefulness of the model in accounting for experience. There are four criteria a model must meet to be regarded as accurate: 1) elegance; 2) contains few arbitrary or adjustable elements; 3) agrees with and explains all existing observations; and 4) makes detailed predictions about future observations that can disprove or falsify the model if they are not borne out (p.51). Unfortunately the book does not show how intelligent design fails to meet those same criteria for validity. Still, the authors insist that no God hypothesis is required to account for all we observe, including creation *ex nihilo* (which, though we do not observe it, seems to be the way things got started).

It may be that the book is most useful if the reader dispenses with the theological issues the authors purport to raise. It is indeed a useful capsule of string theory and M-theory along with quantum physics, and provides a useful look into a model of reality that may hold possibility for the future. Maybe the theology was just a gimmick to attract readers to a subject that is covered more adequately elsewhere, and is essentially uninteresting to most. It seems to have succeeded as a marketing effort since the book is currently on the NY Times best seller list at #18 of 20.

# The Practice of Integrity

A Review of

## *Doing Theology in a Pluralistic World*<sup>21</sup>

by

Yap Kim Hao, ThD, D.D.

Pluralism of culture and religion is no abstraction today. As I sit to write, the Chinese family next door has just ignited a long string of firecrackers in celebration of the New Year (Year of the Goat); the Buddhist center up the street is sounding bells and clackers in a ritual that lasts throughout the night; three nearby Mosques are sounding the call to prayers; Hindu families down the street are gathering flower buds for their personal altars; and I am listening to a recording of Handel's "Messiah." This situation is normal in Malaysia, and is becoming increasingly commonplace around the world. That fact does not make it any easier to grasp. Perhaps no church leader is better prepared to deal with the diversity of cultures and religions in today's world than Malaysia's first Asian Bishop of the Methodist Church, Yap Kim Hao.

Bishop Yap addresses the topic from deeply personal experiences of living in a pluralistic society and of attempting to act responsibly and faithfully in that situation. His book has provided us wisdom gained from intense involvement in the social issues that arise when people of very different persuasions try to live in peace and justice. He also brings to the task an immense sweep of knowledge from Tertullian to Tracey in fields of theology, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. His eight-page bibliography is itself a gift of value to anyone concerned to approach the topic of contemporary cultural pluralism.

Dr. Yap begins with a personal statement of principles and experiences that immediately inform the reader that this is no speculative treatise, but one borne out of experiences of a highly eventful life. He then focuses on "The Ground of Pluralism" drawing from contemporary scientific analyses of reality and sociology of knowledge to establish that pluralism is part of the nature of life itself, not an aberration to be overcome. Yet to accommodate the immense diversity of life, a principle of transcendence is required, acknowledgement of some point beyond us, the recognition of which implies our own perceptions are partial and therefore open to dialogue with other perceptions.

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<sup>21</sup> Yao Kim Hao, *Doing Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Nashville: Methodist Book House, Methodist Centre, 1990)

Dr. Yap delves next into the cultural context and its impact on religion. After observing the complex interrelationship between religion and culture in which each influences the other, he lays out various approaches of Christians to relate to cultures other than their own. Most approaches have been little more than pious cultural imperialisms, and we now face what he terms "Eurocentric Christianity," clearly undesirable in Asia and actually only one of many possible interpretations of the Gospel. The issue is difficult since there is no "core" of "text" which can be adapted to various contexts: the text itself is culturally shaped. So how is a comprehensive theology possible that does not become hopelessly enmeshed in its own restrictive cultural values? Dr. Yap's answer is to place a priority on "Praxis," action which is transformative. Right action is informed by theory, but is that from which authentic theory derives.

Having established his position, Dr. Yap moves on to consider the fields of Religion, Politics, and Ecology and ways to apply the principles of praxis and contextualization. In each, he describes in detail several distinctive approaches of relating to the diversity that is present.

In religion, there are the Exclusivistic, the Inclusivistic, and the Pluralistic approaches, all of which betray deficiencies. The most nearly effective approach is one of dialogue in which the topic is less doctrine than action, in this case the soteriological activities in which people of different faiths do battle against powers that de-humanize society. People who share common actions are able to get "beyond dialogue" in their religious discussions.

The longest chapter is devoted to "The Arena of Politics." Bishop Yap's question is, How do Christians relate authentically to the political arena, for relate they must. Attempts to separate religion from politics simply affirm the status quo and are not neutral, as advocates of this position wish. Dr. Yap then describes three approaches of exercising Christian responsibility in the political arena: the Political Theology of Europe, the Liberation Theology of Latin America, and the Minjung Theology of Korea. While each is deficient in some ways, all are genuine attempts to relate constructively to society.

Dr. Yap's final chapter on the "Sphere of Ecology" notes that single cause naturalists tend to be from affluent societies and fail to appreciate the human dimensions of ecology. His major point is to advocate a human ecology which affirms and honors the diversity of humankind. From his perspective, "...since we have to develop a harmonious relationship with nature for our survival on earth in this generation and in succeeding generations, we need to foster a

harmonious relationship with one another in the human community.” (206)

The reality of pluralism is clear, never more so than during the past decade. In the 80's, innovations in transportation and communications broke down many of the barriers among people and allowed us to experience first-hand the impact of pluralism. In many cases it was personally devastating. We had to recognize that many people cherish values abhorrent to us and despise that which we hold most dear. Being tolerant in those situations is difficult, for it raises the existential question, “Where do I stand? Must I deny my own values to honor another's? Or must I deny the authenticity of the other?” Neither seems particularly enlightened, and many adopted the stance that “All is relative.” Well documented by Alan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>22</sup>, this perspective is an escape from the realities of pluralism with which people are faced on a daily basis. Any adequate perspective on this issue will have to promote an integrity in which one can hold fast to one's own values while honoring another who holds opposing values. Today, barriers are coming down. We cannot live separately, but can we live together? The search for integrity in the world of pluralism is no easy investigation. But it cannot be avoided.

Dr. Yap's mention of transcendence as that which makes possible integrity in diversity is profoundly insightful. Conviction of a point of transcendence has a dialectic effect: nothing in life is absolute and deserving of total loyalty. Yet because it is, it is good, i.e., it shares being with the transcendent. One can stand in one's own position with integrity without claiming either its universal validity or denying that validity exists at all.

Further, the notion that religious dialogue might center on praxis adds a new dimension to the notion of dialogue. It seems quite possible that persons of dramatically different faiths might well converse profitably on action which will release human potential; whereas doctrinal discussions inevitably reach a stalemate.

Perhaps it might be possible to adopt Dr. Yap's concept of dialogue and to discuss further one of his points. He describes the responsibility of religion within the political arena as “to express its views,” to speak out and play a critical role in politics.

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)



*"To be critical of one position does not mean that we support the opposition's position. In one sense religion has to stand above and be critical of all positions when they violate principles of justice and the rights of people." (p 130)*

But the posture of "standing above" is the stance Dr. Yap has shown to be unavailable to us humans. There is no standpoint "above" the political sector; one is enmeshed in it as one is in culture. There are certainly values promoted by religions which any political organization attempting to weld a consensus must consider, and religions have the same right and responsibility to voice them as does any other participant in the body politic. But what religion cannot and must not do is to impose its values on everyone; life is inescapably pluralistic. The posture if "standing above" tends to create a "good guy...bad guy" relationship and to minimize the opportunity for dialogue and working together on a common solution.

Perhaps we might consider the role of religion to "...lead society in the social act of repentance" (H.R. Niebuhr)<sup>23</sup>. When there are social injustices, as there certainly are, it is the role of religion, not only to expose them in fond hopes that someone else will solve them, but also to disclose a practical alternative to oppressive structures. When, for example, the gap between the rich and poor becomes clear as a major moral issue, perhaps it is the role of religion to develop a model for overcoming the innocent suffering and to put it into place as a demonstration of what authentic human community might look like. Such a task requires immense effort, both intellectual (to get beyond prejudicial standpoints and discern the real obstacles to justice and peace) and social (to live and work among the oppressed, bridging economic gaps and releasing their God-given potential to care for themselves). This extraordinary expenditure is, perhaps, the authentic "praxis" of which Dr. Yap speaks. Operating from this posture, one often finds those in positions of influence to be allies in bringing about social change.

Perhaps we might helpfully identify the political arena as "the organizational dynamic" within society. It is as all-encompassing as culture, and like culture, is interdependent with religion. Speaking from the point of view of praxis, if it be possible to mobilize some of the resources of the powerful to remedy social evils, then the remedies will have a good chance of success. There are certainly forces of evil afoot with which no compromise can be justified; but within the political

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<sup>23</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society" Chapter 5 in *The Gospel, The World, and The Church*, ed. Kenneth Scott Latourette (New York: Harper Bros., 1946)

structures, there are also people of good will whose assistance can be invaluable. Efforts are required to locate and to channel their energy into constructive efforts.

This minor variance by no means detracts from the value of Dr. Yap's book. It is a primer for anyone seriously raising the questions of living a life of faith responsibly in the real world of the 1990's, whether one be Asian or Western.

Dr. Yap's distinctly Asian perspective on the issues surrounding pluralism is as refreshing as is his knowledge of the many ways of dealing with them. His insights show themselves to be derived from involvement with society as well as with books. The combination of the two might well serve as a model for future Asian theologians from whom we Westerners have much to learn.

# The Theology of Joseph W. Mathews

## *Background*

Joe Mathews' life was a fascinating series of adventures that ranged from chaplaincy in the US Army during the Pacific campaign of World War II, to seminary professor at Perkins School of Theology, to co-director of the Faith & Life Community of Austin, Texas, to founder and dean of the Ecumenical Institute / Institute of Cultural Affairs. Details of this extraordinary life with some of its exploits are the subject of a book by his brother, Bishop James K. Mathews<sup>24</sup>.

Joe was not known principally as a theologian, i.e., as one who talks about theology. He was more of a Methodist prophet. Depending on whom you ask, he is known as a radical, a reformer, a saint, an offense, a genius, or a guide. One of his incredible capacities was to touch profoundly everyone he met. For example, at a university seminar on vocation, a student asked what he should do with his life. Joe responded, "What are the three biggest problems in the world?" The student named what he thought they were. "Then," Joe said, "If I come back here next year and you're not doing something about them, you're living an inauthentic life!" Subtle tact was not a trait that marked the man. Many people benefitted from the blunt instrument of his tongue.

Despite his practice of addressing lives, Joe developed and practiced a significant theological standpoint. He had the ability to combine an unreservedly demythologizing approach and a radically phenomenological method. He was as wedded to the Bible as the most rabid of fundamentalists. Unlike many of them, he took it seriously, not literally.

Late in life when he confronted spiritual depth and authenticity in other religions, Joe apologized for his "Christian bigotry."<sup>25</sup> But he never floated away into the theological limbo where any spiritual insight is equally compelling. Christian faith formed him from birth to death. His unique gift was twofold: 1) in making the faith "transparent" so that its truth could be grasped by anyone, and 2) in manifesting its presence so that its peculiar love could impact social life. For Joe, the two tasks of

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<sup>24</sup> James K. Mathews, *Brother Joe* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2006)

<sup>25</sup> Joseph W. Mathews, "Transpandane Christianity" in *Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews*, ed. John L. Epps (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp. 245ff.

knowing and doing were inseparable and inevitable expressions of a lifelong passion for authentic being.

Some have said that his social efforts were too narrow or his theology too exclusively Christian for relevance in today's global society. But this is to miss a point central to his theology. Joe was convinced that we are, all of us, ineradicably conditioned by unique, peculiar, finite and historical elements of tradition and culture. That is our gift and our curse. The task of integrity in a global society is NOT to shuck it off but to render it intelligible while living it with integrity. Joe could "fall down a well into a common water-table of profound consciousness" with an old Hindu and an old Muslim; but he never let us forget that it was a Christian well that he fell down and the others came by a different route.<sup>26</sup>

So also with social action: you pick your service in lucidity and analysis of what seem to be the major contradictions, and you pour your passion into it at a depth that releases human spirit. The conviction implicit in this approach was twofold: 1) that the human spirit is capable of dealing with human conditions if its power is released, and 2) that there is not ONE social cause deserving attention but many. Joe's selection of community development as a focus for his efforts was not arbitrary, but neither was it exclusive. One gives thanks daily that someone else is attending to the other causes for which I, too, am responsible. It was shallow liberalism rather than alternative causes that moved him to ire and provoked some of his most caustic remarks. This perspective of relativistic authenticity has its theoretical foundations in the works of Joe's teacher, H. Richard Niebuhr, especially in *The Meaning of Revelation*.

### *The Standpoint*

Joe's field of specialization, if such a word can be used, was ethics or moral theology. His lifelong passion was for that which was authentically, profoundly and experientially human. And that mark of "profound humanness" which, more than any other, accounts for his various endeavors is: FREEDOM AS UNIVERSAL OBLIGATION. Around that central understanding was woven an intricate web of thought and action that marks Joe's unique contribution to "the 20<sup>th</sup> century civilizing process" as he might say. The clear context of that

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<sup>26</sup> "Six Speeches" *ibid*, p. 160

freedom was the Church understood as social pioneer. In a deathbed summary of his works, he referred to always having understood himself as working to empower the Church in her authentic mission.<sup>27</sup>

This central focus of freedom gave rise to an extraordinary range of activity in Joe's life. He dealt with the interior life, religious practices, community development, group planning, religious education, fund-raising, and business management to name a few arenas that felt his presence. If some of his efforts were a little bizarre in their results (such as the shark-fishing industry proposed to a people for whom shark was taboo, or the effort to re-state the Ignatian Retreat in existentialist terms), none the less passion and creativity marked them.

The undergirding of Joe's concept of freedom lay in his understanding of the human condition as up against absolute, unintelligible otherness. In no way could one justify one's life before that which is absolute that we dare address as "God." Finitude, inadequacy, and deficiency always and inevitably mark one's thoughts and actions. Before "The Mystery," as some of us came to refer to this awesome otherness, the human being is always found wanting.

At the same time, one is nevertheless given being and thrust into action. One's inadequate life is accepted, approved, declared "good." One need not spend energy trying to justify oneself since this is both impossible and unnecessary. One is released to creative action.

This situation is the basis of absolute freedom. Nothing is prohibited, since one is always inadequate before the infinite anyway. On the other hand, our actions always occur within relationships and amount to fulfilling the obligation of that relationship. And our relationships have been shown to extend from the self to the neighbor to the community to the world to the universe. In this relativistic world, "each action affects the farthest star." (Whitehead) This means that freedom does not consist, as usually understood, of responding in the context of self alone, of "doing whatever I please." Following Bonhoeffer, Joe grasped that this is the smallest realm of freedom and in fact limits options more than any other. That relationship which provides for absolute freedom is and must be universal. Save I have an obligation to all that is, my options are limited. Within that obligation, I am free to choose any option whatsoever.

The consequence of this understanding is, of course, guilt, constant and persistent. One is always guilty of offending some obligation. But this is the human condition: one cannot adequately

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<sup>27</sup> "Preface" *ibid.*, p. i

respond to every obligation; one must choose, and that choice is the essence of freedom. Total freedom means that all the options are open, and whichever one chooses, one takes the responsibility to invest it with all the creativity and passion one has. One also assumes responsibility for the guilt and consequences of the relationships one has violated. In this is authentic life: that one chooses lucidly the life one lives and then lives it with passion and creativity in the widest possible context with acknowledgement of the inadequacies it entails. For those inadequacies and violations of relationships, one relies on the Word in Jesus Christ, which pronounces forgiveness.

This standpoint of freedom marked Joe's life and thought, and was the central theme of his work.

### *Conclusion*

Joe was extraordinarily adept at metaphors. In describing the rewards of the authentic life, which he likened to continual warfare between the self and being-itself, Joe remarked that at the end, when Being finally won, Being sometimes gave the adversary who had been faithful, a wink.<sup>28</sup> At Joe's funeral, his cremated remains were held inside a carefully crafted pine box, built to fit in the niche designated by the cemetery. When the ceremonies were finally completed and the box lifted into its niche, a single bolt was found to be protruding into the space from the niche above. A scruffy laborer hastily fetched wire cutters and removed the bolt from the space, and Joe was placed in his final resting-place. But for some of us onlookers, Joe had his wink. And then it was done.

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<sup>28</sup> "Meditation" *ibid.*, p. 131

## Towards a Theology of Development

Dr. Joseph Van Arendonk's speech, "New Dimensions in Development"<sup>29</sup> posed a sensitive challenge to groups concerned with the human factor in development. Primary among them was the question, "What is Man?" (sic) Without a clear and adequate concept of the human, development will inevitably be thwarted at best and destructive at worst. It will be guided by false notions, ancient hypotheses or cultural biases that have little to do with reality.

The question is related not only to the sector battling rural poverty. As Van Arendonk points out, efforts in the "Third World" must be complemented by efforts in the "First" (and "Second"). Tom Peters and Nancy Austin illustrate this contention in their superb analysis of top corporations, *A Passion for Excellence* (New York: Warner Books, 1985). Too often, they say, management is characterized by T.D.C. (Thinly Disguised Contempt) which effectively negates the maximum development of human resources. No manager (or developer) intends contempt, but operating out of an inadequate grasp of the human factor - often derived from cultural biases and fed by preoccupation with bottom lines - people commit highly prejudicial acts that negate their announced intentions (executive parking places, for example).

Describing the human factor is an immensely complicated undertaking. Countless articles have been written on the subject, and the study of "humanities" has consumed a vast amount of intellectual energy through the ages. But the challenge posed by Van Arendonk is not to provide an exhaustive and definitive description of humankind. It is rather to describe the crucial elements of humanity with sufficient clarity to focus development efforts on real issues, issues whose resolution will make a real difference and be an enduring contribution to the human enterprise. None of us engaged in human development could wish for less, yet few of us know where to begin. Any response that approaches adequacy is bound to have a philosophical cast. The temptation is to wander into abstraction, or to restrict oneself to episodic insights in the manner of short stories. The former is too general, the latter too particular to be of much use.

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Van Arendonk, Chief, Programme Coordination, Management and Field Support Office, United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA), New York in an address to an international gathering of the Institute of Cultural Affairs in Bilbao, Spain in August 1986. His provocative address raised the question "What is Man?" and provided an image of the ICA as an organization of "People of the Question." This essay is my response.

The intent of this essay is to provide a set of indicators that point toward that about humanity which releases creativity, responsibility, and fulfillment. These comments, then, are an attempt to share insights into involvement with people around the world.

I will begin with five formulae concerning humanness and then elaborate on each with enough clarification to provoke further reflection.

### ***Five Theses***

1. Human beings are both limited and transcendent. This leads to the problems of suffering and death, and provides the possibility for religion.
2. Human beings are unique yet related. This situation presents the problem of evil and provides for the possibility of reconciliation.
3. Human beings are structured and yet creative. This duality leads to the problem of vocation and presents the possibility of integrity.
4. Human beings are both solitary and social. This presents the problem of participation and provides the possibility of responsibility.
5. Human beings are rational and emotional. This leads to the problem of values and provides the possibility for fulfillment.

#### ***1. Human beings are limited and transcendent. This leads to the problem of suffering and death, and provides the possibility for religion.***

There is no point to efforts that attempt to exclude either the limitedness or the transcendence of human beings. Behavioral determinism and pure mysticism are both dehumanizing. Each has validity in its own sphere, but a human being is more than his or her biological or cultural conditioning and is also more than the capacity for unity with the cosmos. Neither will go away and both deserve enhancement – together.

The limits are faced most intimately in occasions of suffering and death; one's transcendence makes them problematic, seeming to negate any significance to life. Easy solutions don't work (e.g. "Why is it bad for babies to die if all their life will entail suffering" or "Don't grieve; he/she has gone to heaven {or hell or reincarnation.}") The problem of suffering and death, which is the deepest form of the problem of meaning, will not



go away. However much development efforts try, suffering and death will persist as problems and crises. It is not to say that developers should not minimize suffering and prolong life. But these efforts will not rid humanity of this problem.

The possibility in this situation is religion – NOT superstitious practices nor creedal conformity nor institutional bigotry. But the possibility of human significance is found in perception and affirmation of the ultimate Mystery from whence we come and to which we go and which permeates every instant of life. Acknowledging and affirming that “other-world-in-the-midst-of-this-world” provides a lasting significance to the human enterprise.

Experience bears this out. Village after village that has participated in human development has undergone a revitalization of the local religion. This is not a resurrection of ancient culture, but rather, a renewed perception of life’s ultimate meaning in the face of suffering and death.

This is not to suggest that part of the development task is verbally to promote the verities of a particular religion – even a “transparent” one. That activity is the surest – and quickest – way to be thrown out of the community. It IS, however, to say that fully engaging with people in their never-ending struggle with life’s limits is mute but powerful communication of the significance that goes beyond successes and failures. It is to be a religious.

## ***2. Human beings are unique, yet related. This situation presents the problem of evil and provides the possibility for reconciliation.***

The uniqueness of each individual is self-evident. Excessive emphases on self-actualization, however, whether through psychology or the numerous faddish schemes that emerged in the late sixties and well into the seventies, soon runs up against relationships. As John Donne noted, “No man is an island, entire of itself; each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....<sup>30</sup>” Nor, however, can humanity or a community be regarded solely as a “lump,” conforming automatically to established structures. Structures are necessary for development to be effective – but so also is attention to those who manage to “fall out” of them.

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<sup>30</sup> John Donne, “Meditation XVII” from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624

Because of our relatedness, individual activities have consequences far beyond the person or persons involved. Likewise, as Freud observed, group structures and values often have harmful consequences for individuals. This is the basis of the problem of evil. Even if the individual and the group are well-intentioned, the consequences of their benevolent activities are frequently destructive. Charitable acts, for example, often create a demotivating dependency on the part of the recipients, even though they are intended for their benefit, and serve to pacify the conscience of the donor.

Efforts at human development need to go to extreme lengths to foresee and minimize negative consequences as they attempt to maximize both individual and group potential. But they need not be surprised to find spin-offs that wreak havoc on innocent parties. The problem of evil will not go away. Human life exists in the tension of being bound to that which frustrates.

The possibility in this situation is reconciliation, a term too often used to mean escape from tension. The tension, however, is inescapable. Real reconciliation occurs in its midst - when a bridging of the separateness appears, providing a new linkage among people in their unique and tension-filled diversity. This reconciliation is the aim of human development.

Three approaches to development are now contending for the hearts, minds, pocketbooks, and policies of our time. All three are attempts to deal with the individual-relation tension. One focuses on helping individuals and is marked by relief efforts to victims of natural or social disaster. The second emphasizes relatedness, and attempts to strengthen the dispossessed so that they can successfully contend with oppressive social structures. It is most clearly dramatized by insurgency movements and guerilla warfare. The third is the approach of human development in which individuals and communities are mobilized to do their own development alongside people from the public and private sectors.

The latter is the approach of reconciliation, for a coalition of this sort achieves a two-way bridge of communication and action, and so "unblocks" the relationship between "haves" and "have-nots." Promoting this link among people of integrity on both sides is the role of the developer. It entails being firmly rooted on both sides and being trampled on by each. Such is the nature of a bridge. Without this role, attempts at naïve reconciliation will be overcome by the inevitable tensions between the individual and human relatedness.

***3. Human beings are structured and yet creative. This duality leads to the problem of vocation and presents the possibility of integrity.***

Everybody wants to do something creative with his or her life. Whether for one's own power or prestige, or on behalf of family, friends, community nation, profession or ideal, people are always facing the question of how to use their lives in a way that makes a difference. Simultaneously, people are determined by accident of birth to act out their lives within the confines of particular structures, organizations that provide protection to members and afford a mechanism through which creativity can be exercised effectively.

Paradoxically, the very structures – family, community, job, profession, etc. – constrict the creative impulses they exist to promote. To the creative spirit, personal capacity is too little, friends too narrow, the community too moribund, the job too confining, and the ideal too distant. This disillusionment is the vocational problem, and it is the inevitable accompaniment to the human journey.

Response to the problem ranges from quiet despairing resignation to “occupational hopping” to frantic and sometimes violent attempts to change the system and make room for more creativity. None of these responses resolves the problem, though each has a legitimate place in the scheme of things.

In looking at the lives of admirable people – “heroes” of the culture or recognized “saints” of the people – one finds, not an absence of the problem but a transformation of it. The problem of vocation for them is not something to be escaped but something to be owned and valued and struggled with continuously. This is the mark of integrity – to know, to own, and to struggle with one's creativity-within-limits, as part of one's unique contribution to civilization. This posture, and not defiance or transcendence, is behind the famous “here I stand” statement of Luther, often recognized as the motto of integrity.

Promotion of integrity, then, is the task of the human developer. More than and alongside of providing employment and income-generating ventures, the developer is attempting to promote local “ownership” of both the creativity and the structural limits of the particular situation. This task has to do with continually generating stories of the civilizational impact of the particular situation, for integrity is fed by the same stream as the vocational problem – an unlimited care about the future.

#### ***4. Human beings are solitary and social. This presents the problem of participation and provides the possibility of responsibility.***

A common phenomenon affecting us all is the painful sense of being “left out.” Whether it has to do with being “ganged up on” by schoolyard bullies or being by-passed in the company decision-making, all of us sense ourselves cut off from the seat of power, the core of decisions, and the majority opinions. There is no more powerful witness to our solitary, social nature than this feeling. It seems as if we do belong and want to belong, but find ourselves a left-over piece of a reassembled machine relegated to an insignificant corner shelf. When in a group, we feel called on to “back off” or to “stand out,” but when left to our solitude we are unbearably lonely.

Curiously, no matter what level in the organization one attains, the experience is the same: “They” are in charge; I want to participate. Youth, women, elders, and men are all coming to terms with the drive for a significant role in the scheme of things and are inventing new ways to have a say. This is a tremendous breakthrough in its potential for releasing human resources. But it is only the tip of the iceberg.

Participation does not exist apart from the interior decision of responsibility. Whatever one’s organizational level, so long as someone else is responsible for the organization, one’s drive for participation will be frustrated. Responsibility (and participation) involves commitment of the self, the very opposite of protecting my solitude. Paradoxically, when the solitary self *is* committed, it does not go away, but rather is intensified.

You want to be where the action is? Then be responsible for the action. It works.

The task of human development is to design and promote mechanisms of participation – neighborhood meetings, village meetings, farmers’ groups, women’s organizations, health committees, etc. – so that everyone in fact *is* involved in the knowing and action of the community. But structures with lots of members and frequent meetings are not sufficient. Until the people begin to *own* the task, to sense personal responsibility *for* its success, the malaise of participation and suspicion of the nebulous “them” will persist. Eliciting responsibility is at the heart of the development task.

***5. Human beings are both rational and intuitive. This leads to the problem of values and presents the possibility of fulfillment.***

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the demise of absolute values - a milieu in which good and bad, right and wrong were clearly and universally defined. The second half saw the proliferation of value-systems, often existing side-by-side. The value problem of today is not an absence, but a multitude of systems each claiming exclusive validity. Such is our situation that the rock culture exists alongside conservative Islam and fundamentalist Christianity; in one place drug traffickers are hanged, in another, barely noticed. Revolution and counter-revolution in drugs, sex, education, and family ethics have left a bizarre assortment of practices in place. It is perfectly clear that values are invented, not built into the mechanism of the universe.

The problem people encounter in this situation is: by what standards shall I measure life? Rational ethical systems exist to guide behavior in the most diverse directions. It's quite confusing to one who would be authentic.

At that point it is clear that values go beyond the rational; indeed, the human capacity of reason functions principally to elucidate the implications of values selected by other means. The intuitive (right-brain, emotion, spiritual, etc.) capacity is more active than the rational in selecting values.

Intuition provides a unique opportunity to affirm the given as the good. After all, who says my life (education, health, looks, family, income, community, etc.) is bad? Another option is to regard them as good - the very measure of authenticity. As absurd and arbitrary as this sounds, it is no more so than blindly accepting the judgment that it is a failure. And it has decidedly positive practical consequences.

The starting point for local development shifts away from "helping the poor bastards to change their abominable situation." The difference is profound. However great the attempt to be tolerant, and however benevolent the intent, regarding the target of development as defective is condescending and will result in arrogance. This is neither human nor effective. Regarding the given as the good (different, but good none the less) provides a basis for respect, for eliciting and using local input, and for celebrating local events, all of which are recognized necessities for human development. The possibility for eliciting fulfillment depends on its already being there. Our job is to release it.

## *Conclusion*

Dr. Van Arendonk has been exceedingly complementary towards the ICA's work on human development, and we deeply appreciate his insightful and challenging remarks. His comments about ICA as "People of the Question" are especially provocative as they force us to an open future with no "axes" to grind or philosophies to defend. But it would be an exaggeration to suggest that we move in a void with no guidelines. In these remarks I have attempted to indicate what some of our answers have been to the perennial question "What is man?"

We may well be people of the question; certainly in the sense of constantly attempting to be on the edge of discovery - but not in any sense of valuing inquiry for its own sake. We settle for answers that are partial and transitory - but none the less useful. As new discoveries arise, it is our intent to embody them in the working models that underlie our action.

In the meantime, we offer these insights into the profoundly human as a contribution to the disclosure of that which will release resources for our new global civilization. And, as the good doctor recommends, we will keep our questions alive.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Mystery in Life: Dimensions of Authenticity**

## Introduction

This chapter contains some essays on themes that became important to clarify: Christmas, faith, reconciliation, and Jesus. As will become clear, they were written over a span of time and represent some applications of the “first principles” in Chapter One.

The section on Christmas Musings is a series of reflections done in the Advent season when it seemed important to identify the meaning of the celebration. In most cases, I took a particular aspect of the season and used it as a window into the profound dimension of life that is being celebrated,

The article on “Faith” is an attempt to make sense of the dimensions of that reality as it works itself out in life. It was occasioned by meetings with a couple of extraordinary people who are my friends.

“Thoughts on Reconciliation” came about in reflection on some rather unpleasant encounters with colleagues. In retrospect I appreciate their influence, though at the time, that influence was most unwelcome!

“The Jesus Principle” is an essay drafted while working in research at the Ecumenical Institute in Chicago. It is an attempt to bring us up to date on the “quest for the historical Jesus” with an emphasis on why it matters.



## Christmas Musings

### *Themes - 1989*

It's the simple messages that get to you. So what is the simple message that has made Christmas last for 1989 years and even permeate cultures not associated with the Christian faith?

Maybe it's the birth motif - the new beginning that is heralded with every new life; new possibility, new potential for awareness and accomplishment, for service and experience, for insight and creativity. The birth of the Christ means the entry into history of not just another person but of a paradigm for all persons; a possibility of dealing with constraints as gifts, with limits as possibilities, with the Sovereign Mystery as Father. The new awareness is not of more stuff or even more depth: it is awareness from the standpoint of "It's forgiven, not a problem to be solved." The new potential for accomplishment is not for more activity but for activity that is "on behalf of." In other words, the newness of the birth of the Christ is the new context of forgiveness available to humanity: now we have the potential of living all that is, is good.

Maybe it's the **angels**. They're the ones who announced the good news first. And that's what angels are: the announcers, the heralds, the harbingers who make known to ordinary folks what is really happening. If our role as the Church is to be "History's Harbingers," then angels are our role models. What they did in the Christmas story was to scare the living daylights out of some ordinary working people and, by placing a new demand on them, change their entire operating context. "Fear not, for unto you is born this day in the City of David a savior which is Christ the Lord..." Sort of an un-spectacular message but wrapped in a super-spectacular presentation: winged creatures in the middle of the night singing in Latin (*Gloria in Excelsis Deo*) -- absolutely designed to get the serious attention of the listener. Maybe that's our job - to invent the extravaganzas that present the simple message in ways that can't be ignored.

Maybe it's the **giving**. According to the story, Christmas is when God gave us his Son for our benefit. So we celebrate the day by giving gifts to each other. As well we should, for the profound function of life is not to hoard and acquire but to expend and serve. So in the giving of Christmas gifts, we're rehearsing a profound truth about life. Of course we've turned that truth upside down and made it into a commercial festival par excellence. So what is intended to celebrate the giftedness of life and the dynamic of giving becomes a frantic occasion of getting, some

of which is to be given. But the giving is still there; perversions don't destroy the underlying truth.

Perhaps it's the **shepherds**. Plenty of use for a message that ordinary people are likely to get the profoundest of messages first... Or maybe it's the **wise men** from the East. Certainly the East is a repository of wisdom that recognizes ultimacy when it appears.

Possibly it's the "**Pacem in Terris**." Maybe we're getting to an era in which people don't find violence an acceptable way to settle disputes. Maybe we're growing up as a species.

Perhaps it's even about **receiving**. The whole point of Santa et. al. is that we get what we don't deserve, can't afford, hardly need, and wouldn't buy. That's certainly true about life - the really important elements (significance, acceptance, love, vocation, friendships) are not earned but given. We find gratitude a difficult state since it means forgetting about earning or deserving things. But that's the point of Christmas: we don't, and yet it is present.

Trees, music, snow, North Pole, elves, stockings, reindeer, cars, wreaths, red-and-green, all the cultural trappings of the season: each has the potential for transparency to the simple message: We are each of us cherished and forgiven by the ultimate source of all that is. That's probably enough for most of us.

## *The Herald Angel's Song - 1990*

"Hark," hell! I've been singing 2000 years -  
In 13 different keys, major & minor modes, to  
Religious and secular audiences - as jazz,  
Classical & pop - to 40 different cultures in  
Person and on paper.

And who gives a damn?

Still the annual sentiment over new life  
For a few days then back to petty struggles  
That eat energy like vultures on carrion.  
Sometimes I'd like to leave the singing  
To younger souls with more energy  
And less experience. Maybe they'd be able  
To get results from Rock or Country/Western or Heavy Metal or  
Hip Hop.

But job opportunities for Herald Angels are pretty limited.  
Once the vision of authenticity grabs you,  
You can't not sing.

In new languages with new images  
To new audiences with new expectations you sing  
The same delight over Mystery in Mundanity,  
Over Freedom in Obedience, of ultimate significance in petty  
propositions  
And let the chips fall where they will.

After all, you're only an Angel  
Not running the show.  
So here we go again:  
"Glory To The New-Born King!"

## *Music - 1995*

The music of the season has come as a great treat for us. Never mind that here in a country that is officially Muslim and possessed of substantial minorities of all the world's great religions - Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Taoist - the public music of the Christmas season does not distinguish between "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "O Holy Night." Both are likely to emanate from the Musak systems around the city.

Perhaps they're on to something. Maybe all the Santa and Rudolph tunes also carry the potential of profundity. After all, if the Lord of All can become incarnate in a baby in a manger, why not in a great horned quadruped or in a rotund philanthropic midnight chimney-sweep? It probably has a lot to do with the listener. Certainly tunes portraying the birth of the Christ Child are no guarantee of perceiving anything profound. Sentiment has a way of intruding into any mythological tradition and infecting it with trivia. Yet even the trivia can become transparent.

Still, we have a craving for a few of the classics: "Gloria in Excelsis" and "Adeste Fideles" have a resonance that is hard to explain or to substitute. It's the tone of longing-fulfilled, or gratitude-beyond-measure, of grandeur-amidst-trivia, of harmony-in-diversity, of energy, of resolve and of new reality these old classics portray that comes to us as especially appropriate. In that vein, we found a recording of Gregorian Christmas Chants, and despite the "Hodie Christus Natus Est" and other unspeakable phrases, it's a joy to hear.

Perhaps the point of all this is a reminder: the music reminds us of the miraculous presence that shows up in the most unlikely situations, creating wonder from the mess.

## *Surprise - 1997*

Everything about the Christmas story is filled with surprise – the angels appearing the middle of the night, the single bright star, the virgin birth, the baby in a manger – it's as if the storyteller were out to jolt our sensibilities and pull us out of our preoccupation with the ordinary.

The contemporary occurrences of the Christ Word in our lives are similarly and inevitably filled with surprise.

It's commemorative celebration, however, has become locked in predictability – the same colors, moods, songs, decorations, and food year after year. We love it all, from the classic to the funky. No other festival has the depth of tradition and nostalgia that marks Christmas. We spend weeks in preparation for the familiar rites and rituals that mark the season.

Maybe that's the best way to get ready for surprise: to be preoccupied with the customary. When Mystery occurs, the familiar is no shield. Our lives, jammed as they are with the conventional, don't impede the surprising incursions of Mystery, any more than they did for the shepherds or the wise men.

## *Incarnation - 1998*

“The Word become flesh and dwelt among us...”

And still does. Incarnation happens in the most unexpected places. Perhaps in the Phnom Penh newsboy badgering you to take a paper from him and not from the ten others crowding around the hotel entrance as you came out. What catches your attention isn't so much his pitiful plight as a homeless, orphaned street child subject to who knows what in the way of social abuse, but rather his mischievous twinkle that bubbles through his torrent of broken English.

“From me. Here. Me. Remember me? Your promised Get mine. Only 1200 riel...”

Not exactly the babe-in-a-manger, but certainly a powerful young self in ignoble circumstances.

His address was highly personal. He may also have pursued other hotel occupants, but this time it was very personal. An audit to the quick, as you wonder what gives you the right to be the one with advantages that he will never even conceive. Gratitude for your status would be contemptibly arrogant; identification with his plight, hopelessly naïve. In the vast distance between us lies sheer Mystery, bridged only by the twinkle as if we both know something deep about life that neither of us can fathom.

Maybe being thrown up against the unfathomable is what Christmas celebrates. In those moments of confrontation with sheer Mystery, there is sometimes a faint echo of “Gloria in excelsis Deo...” as if the angels are telling us something, and we have the chance again to appreciate life as it is.

## *Angels - 1999*

Angels show up in different guises, but their function is always the same: to announce the presence of the Word in the midst of reality. They don't usually wear wings and robes and go around blowing trumpets. Their message is usually offensive, coming as it does in the midst of a crisis. But angels are fanatic about reality and its goodness. They never let you forget it. Sometimes their ministrations are dramatic; often they are not. This one was.

Malaysia, in its headlong rush to development, has installed an ice rink – two, actually. For Minnesotans that might not be noteworthy, but here in the tropics where the coldest recorded temperature outdoors was 65 degrees Fahrenheit, an ice rink is an extraordinary novelty. One of them is located in the basement floor of a 5-story shopping center so that shoppers on all 5 levels can look down and watch the skaters, atrium-style.

You know what's coming, don't you? I decided to have a go at it after a 15-year abstinence from the sport at which I never excelled. A little shaky, but I gradually and carefully worked up to stability.

Now I hadn't quite reached the level of triple lutz followed by a double toe loop, but I had achieved enough confidence to get away from the wall and skate like a reasonable human being. It felt pretty good to glide along with measures of "Skater's Waltz" flowing through my head. Then I looked up and a young man was charging straight at me against the flow of people with a silly-looking grin on his face. In younger days, I might have simply dodged – or lowered a shoulder like a Mighty Duck and seen what happened. As it was, reflexes took over and I jerked backwards. Gravity did the rest.

What I remember next are sounds: my head hitting the ice, a gasp from the five stories of on-lookers, the tinkle of my glasses on the ice. Staggering up to resume skating I was quickly surrounded by three rink attendants who wiped off the blood, bundled me into a first-aid station, and bandaged up the cut. It turned out not to be the cut that was hurting.

They were ridiculously solicitous, these semi-paramedics, making not-so-subtle remarks about senior citizens, decreasing agility, old men, brittle bones – and saying nothing at all about the turkey who caused the crash. It was my self-image, not my bones, that was brittle to the point of fracture.

On reflection – and insight comes only after some reflection, considerable in this case – those three were angels. They were direct to a fault and relentless in their affirmation of reality. Their message was not

that being senior and skating was wrong, but that all the factors were accepted – the age, the diminished agility, the brittleness. The future is based on the whole of reality, not selected portions or wish-dreams. The way it is, is good. All of it.

I suspect I'm not alone in having experienced a "fall" recently. Asia's economies can certainly identify with the story. And probably both Serbs and Kosovars could ground it. But it's the angels, not the fall, which makes this story worth telling. Without them, there's nothing noteworthy about the experience. With them, a new way of being opened up.

This is the season when angels play a prominent role in the drama. Maybe we can join them in singing praises to the way life is.



## 2002 - *"Peace on Earth, Good Will among All People"*

**Evil is real, but it is not simple.** One morning at 6:30 AM we got in our car to drive to an important program we were facilitating and found 3 wheels and the spare tire stolen! That was just the surprise we did not need to prepare for a conference of 60 CEOs. Secondly, Ann went out on a Sunday morning for a newspaper, and found an elderly lady getting up off the street after a hit-and-run driver had snatched her purse and knocked her down. She had a broken nose and lost a considerable amount of money. We were outraged.

"What kind of people would do such things?" we asked a friend who teaches psychology.

"Desperate people," he replied.

That remark took the steam right out of our outrage. And it made us reflect on how easy it is to demonize the perpetrators of evil. In fact, "Demonizing the Opposition" is a major social undertaking practiced with considerable expertise by people in every sector. Recently it has achieved a spin-off ploy, "Create Your Own Enemy."

Sadly, these ploys work: those we demonize become demonic; the enemies we create become very real threats. It's only when we look past the current situation to the underlying dynamics that we see our own complicity in the undertaking.

Our definition of a situation creates our response and consequently contributes to the outcome of the situation.

This is not an apology for the hit-and-run purse-snatcher or for the tire-stealer or for any of the other "villains" that populate the world. It's just to acknowledge that we're all part of the problem, and potentially part of the solution.

Evil is real, but its causes are complex. Belligerence is hardly ever an effective response. And maybe that's why it took angels to deliver the message that is still revolutionary:

Peace on Earth and Good Will among All People.

## *Christmas Spirit - 2004*

Maybe it's the perspective that matters.

I've been wondering for a couple of weeks what it will take for the "Christmas Spirit" to hit. I remember being infected with it in the past, many times - that sense of wonder and anticipation and appreciation along with a little magic and a substantial dose of nostalgia that marks the season. Some years it has come along with the decorations; sometimes it has been the TV shows that ushered it along; sometimes it has been Church services, and sometimes the incredible music that accompanies the season. This year, they haven't worked yet, and I keep hoping that they will. Not that there's anything wrong about not having it, but still, it's something to be desired. At a recent glorious concert of Christmas music by an *a cappella* choir that was really fabulous, I found myself listening more to the noise of fidgeting children than to the magnificent chords of the music. And wishing it weren't so (both the fidgeting and my irritation). Maybe, I thought, it's time to be more sympathetic to Scrooge since I seem to be mimicking him.

In all this, the one thing to be avoided is to manufacture something inauthentic, to pretend a feeling or to make up a fake "spirit of the season." One thing about Christmas is that it is about the real world and real life. It's into that reality that significance was born, not into some idealized Western suburbia replete with malls where the affluent show their generosity to each other. It was, after all, into Bethlehem that was under an oppressive regime (as it has ever been) that the story sets the incursion of the Word into history. No "Christmas Spirit" heralded that occasion. The songs and stories and decorations and gifts all came later as ways to celebrate the event. They sometimes obscure that which they celebrate - the origin of a new possibility for relating to the reality that surrounds us.

So maybe the current state of un-Christmas-Spiritedness is not a mistake after all. Maybe it's just a means of getting at the reality that makes up life - the rampant brokenness, the suffering, the warfare, the fear, and the moments of respite, fun, relaxation, love, camaraderie - that incomparable mix in which we thrive. Getting clear on it in order to hear the Christmas message - that it's this life that the Word declares good.

## *Lights - 2006*

Somehow lights have come to be associated with the Christmas season. It's a little curious since the Gospel stories mention only one bright light - a star designating the wondrous occasion. Everything else in the story seems pretty dismal. But we've taken that mention and magnified it into strands of lights that encircle houses, buildings, light poles, and trees. Everything seems to get a boost of illumination as electricity bills soar.

Small towns make a celebration of turning on the Christmas Lights, often little more than a few strands of colored bulbs strung across the street. Larger cities sometimes make a bigger "do" of the occasion, coupling it with a parade featuring Santa. This year even the Denver Zoo had an evening festival of lights in which trees were colorfully illuminated, and bulbs outlined Santa as well as various animals around the grounds.

Stories abound of struggles untangling strings of bulbs preparing to attach them to a tree. There's always one bulb missing or burned out which shuts off the whole string. And the tangles in the wires, occasioned by last year's hasty dismantling of the tree, leave few dispositions intact.

Of course, the results of these struggles are often stunning. Lighted trees bring a sense of expectation, then celebration into a home. Lighted houses proclaim neighborhood community. Lighted streets add a touch of glamour to the mundane environment of our engagement, as if something special were going on here. Nothing has changed, but everything looks different.

Interesting, isn't it, that lights are effective only after dark. When the encompassing environment is at its most impenetrable, then the special illumination does its thing, and our efforts to make it happen seem minor indeed.

Our environment this season seems to have a high degree of impenetrability - darkness, if you will. Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Somalia, AIDS, the list can go on and on. And the questions each raises seem to defy adequate answers. To push the analogy, we need some illumination.

This is the season that celebrates the arrival of "the Light of the World," the occasion in which it was announced that our situation is not a mistake, a tragedy, or a trial to be endured. It's a gift, a gift to receive with gratitude and to use with creativity. Einstein said that no problem is solvable in the context in which it arose. So maybe this "light" provides us

a new context. It certainly makes things look different. Let's see what we can do with it.

## *The Cathedral - 2009*

The Cathedral was magnificent. Designed and built by Henry VIII as a symbol of his rule over the newly-established Church of England, it is a massive Gothic structure that has endured countless episodes of human frailty. And its wonder has survived intact. Today its grandeur was being trampled by a group of young Japanese tourists who were loudly photographing everything in sight and mobbing the walkways while I was trying to locate the spot at which John Wesley preached or where Cardinal Wolsey was tried or where St. Frideswide was buried.

This was the cathedral at Christ Church College at Oxford University in England. We were in Oxford for a conference and had taken a little time off to see some of the sights of the city. While we were walking around admiring the arches and stained glass and tributes to notable worthies, there were the Japanese youth in their colored, fashionable outfits energetically chatting and snapping away with hi-tech cameras and cell phones. Their enthusiastic presence seemed to defile the grandeur of the surroundings.

We grumpily made our way away from them trying to hear the organist who was practicing quietly from his perch in the balcony. This place demands vigorous output from the pipes, and he was giving mere whispers that increased our longing for something more suitable. What he may have intended to be soothing was having the opposite effect on us.

Suddenly a full throated choir launched into a four-part chorale in Latin that resonated through the cathedral and echoed off the spires filling the space with wonder. All of a sudden this was no longer a quaint tourist destination; it was a place of awe. Appropriate music made this space once more into a cathedral.

The singers were the Japanese tourists who had spontaneously lined up in the aisle and, under the direction of an experienced conductor, were rendering their considerable appreciation to the setting. If you're a choir, in this place, how can you NOT sing? The timid organist looked over the balcony to see what was going on. When the piece was done, they dispersed and left.

But what they left behind was as tangible as the stone memorials in the cathedral.

## *The Real Story - 2010*

The Christmas story was never really the sweet sentimental saga that culture, tradition, and commercialization have made it.

The shepherds, when the celestial equivalent of a nuclear conflagration "...shone round about them," the King James Version of scripture states in one of its most magnificent understatement, "They were sore afraid." Well, duhhh!

The young couple, who plodded umpteen miles to fulfill an onerous legal obligation in the 9<sup>th</sup> month of gestation, arrived at their destination only to find no accommodations. (Here their interior state was left to the reader's imagination. Was it panic, rage, terror? We can only speculate.)

Or the Magi - imagine a journey from the "Far East" on foot over a desert led only by a celestial sighting (How did they manage on a cloudy day?) in search of some wonder only to find a commoner's baby in a manger. One can only fancy their disappointment and disgust.

The Christmas season is the occasion we celebrate the intrusion of the Word of possibility into the real lives we inhabit, not the ideal ones we wish for. Our wish for you is to receive and celebrate that Word and its transformative promises.

## Faith

I've met two people recently who have changed my view of the role of theology and faith. Both people were (as far as can be determined by an outsider) persons of faith. Both were also theological fundamentalists. That set me thinking. I've previously tended to regard theological fundamentalists as somewhat slow intellectually with a tendency towards fanaticism and a generally obnoxious personality. These two people were exceptionally bright (one, an engineer, and the other, an artist) and sensitive people who manifest humility, gratitude, and compassion in their relations to others. They were people of faith, so far as any outsider can judge another's interior posture. Meeting these people has set me thinking about faith.

By "faith," I am referring to the basic internal stance of a person. Normally the term is used in terms of religious affiliation or belief, but this is one possible sub-set of the term. Everyone is a person of faith: it's the type of faith that matters: whether it's life-affirming or life-denying. So how would I define "authentic faith?" Something like "unmitigated appreciation of life, just the way it is with all its responsibilities and occasions for suffering, and a personal stance of humility, gratitude, and compassion." There's nothing particularly "spiritual" about faith, and it does not depend on ascending a growth curve of spiritual maturity. Such a curve may exist, but the issue of faith occurs at all levels, not simply at the top.

Here I am assuming that faith is universal, at least to some extent, though it is often obscured by illusion, denial, or pretense. Arguably, no one lives without some degree of confidence in life. I do not intend to argue that case here. But I do intend to promote some clarity in how to talk intelligibly and relevantly about that faith.

This is an attempt to sort out the dynamics of faith. There are three: **1. Faith seeks understanding; 2. Faith seeks action; 3. Faith seeks expression.** These dynamics or functions roughly correspond to knowing, doing, and being.

## 1. Faith seeks understanding.

One mode of theology understands itself as carrying out this function. It was the approach to theology of St. Anselm<sup>31</sup> whose theme was "*fides quaerens intellectum*." In this approach the person of faith attempts to provide a rational explanation of her/his basic life perspective. That perspective is assumed, and the role of the explanation is to make it intelligible to others. It is not so much to convince the other as to make sense of one's stance, both to oneself and to another. The starting point in this approach to theology is the faith which is believed (*fides quae creditur*), and the one doing the explaining (*fides qua creditur*) is assumed to be operating from that faith.

One's basic life-stance (faith) raises persistent questions for many. Is life really worthwhile? What's the meaning of it all? How can you affirm life with all the innocent suffering? Or as a comedian put it, "How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?" (*Woody Allen*) These questions are the drivers behind the quest of faith for understanding.

Clearly faith is more important than one's theological understanding of it.

There is another mode of theology which does not necessarily presuppose the presence of the faith which is being explained: I call this **understanding seeking faith**. Many people seem to be looking for a deeper sense of meaning in life, but are turned off by the expressions of faith promoted by institutional religion. Contemporary theology uses expressions that "make sense" in the contemporary worldview.

So how does one determine the validity of theology? It is valid when it provides a rational understanding of faith in terms that are credible to the contemporary world view. Christian theology has another dimension: appropriateness. The explanation must not only be credible, it must also accord with the faith expressed in the scripture and traditions of Christianity and therefore appropriate<sup>32</sup>. This does not mean it has to repeat those expressions since they are expressions, not explanations. But it must translate them into an understandable statement, not add to or subtract from them.

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<sup>31</sup> St. Anselm, 1033-1109. Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109; a noted theologian.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, *Doing Theology Today* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996) esp. pp. 17-19.



Clearly, not every person of faith engages in theological discussion. The drive for understanding is secondary to the presence of faith. While theological understanding may make faith palatable to one's intellect, not everyone is driven in that direction. There is more to life than intellect. Faith seeks understanding, but sometimes that understanding is easily satisfied.

## *2. Faith seeks action.*

I am told by Chinese and Korean theologians<sup>33</sup> that this is the primary mode of communicating faith in the East. Apparently people in this part of the world are more impressed by what one does than by what one says, though "actions speak louder than words" is a familiar expression in the West. More important is the awareness that one's actions communicate one's interior stance towards life, whether it be one of rejection or compassion or avoidance or responsibility or any of the myriad alternative perspective on life one may hold.

Humility, gratitude and compassion demand embodiment in action. Arguments over the role of action in faith have been with us from the beginning. Whether actions produce faith or are produced by faith is a perpetual puzzle to theologians. The classical issue is faith vs. works in producing salvation. Clearly, "faith without works is dead," (James 2:20) but good works may or may not give reliable evidence of faith. "Though I speak with tongues of men and of angels, have not love...though I give all my goods to the poor and my body to be burned, have not love..." (1 Cor. 13). St. James and St. Paul each had different ideas about which is primary.

There seems to be no immediate correlation between good works and faithful people. This is partly because of the nature of works - actions. There simply are no unambiguous actions. Our network of responsibility is so extensive that any action violates some relationship.

Still, faith shows up in action, ambiguous though it be. Whether one can actually work oneself into a state of faith is doubtful, at least to Protestants. But participating in charitable actions does have a powerful impact on one's outlook. And participating in harmful actions also

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<sup>33</sup> These insights came from a discussion with Symond Kock, PhD (Singapore), and Park Si Won, D.M. (S. Korea). We met in Singapore as Si Won was en route to Indonesia on a mission from his church in Korea. He was explaining how, in developing rice barns and padi cultivation, he and his Korean church had built 400+ churches in Indonesia.

impacts one's interior perspective. So while the approach of using action to generate faith is dubious, faith's role in generating action is not. One's actions, whatever they are, manifest one's interior perspective. If that perspective is one of humility, gratitude, and compassion, it shows up in what one does. One may choose not to parade one's faith openly, but still it shows up in one's actions as their underlying motivation.

### *3. Faith seeks expression.*

Faith seeks expression through rituals, liturgy, creeds, scriptures, music, art, drama, worship, and other media that attempt to express what is intrinsically inexpressible – faith.

The language of faith, then, is not particularly rational; it's poetic, filled with imagery that touches the heart. Faith is the basic content of myths, rites, and stories of legendary figures, told to express, not factual history, but interior stances – values, attitudes, and outlooks.

A momentous error occurs when one takes the expressions of faith literally or rationally as if they were explanations. Unfortunately many have taken the expressions of faith and then required literal, rational “belief” in them as the content of faith. This amounts to a willing suspension of disbelief, which may be appropriate to fiction, but is not, either to theology or to ritual. Rituals are not intended to produce understanding; they aim to express and dramatize faith, and so reinforce it at a subliminal level.

Isn't it possible, though, to express the faith in rituals using terms more appropriate to the world view of today? In principle it's possible, though I have not found any expressions that quite do the job. There's a difference between expression and rationalization. For example, take Hamlet:

*“To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them?”*

Stated in more contemporary language, that might go something like this:

*“I face an existential quandary:  
Would it be more meaningful to endure my finite existence passively  
With mute acceptance of its pain and difficulty*

*Or to actively engage with the contradictions I face  
With the prospect of effectively addressing at least a few of them?"*

Though the rational content of the two versions is arguably identical, their expressive power is not. Shakespeare wins hands down!

Institutional religion is an attempt to order and regulate the expressions of faith so that they are widely available and maintain some integrity. That's what constitutes religion: ways of expressing faith. One authentic role of the church is to provide occasions for expression and dramatization of the perspective that is the Christian faith.

Faith can exist without rigorous contemporary theology, as a number of my friends demonstrate. Can it also exist without appropriate means of expression? That's a personal question for me. I'm a ritual addict who appreciates the "high church" expressions of liturgy, architecture, scripture, and music. Emotionalism that passes for depth in many churches leaves me cold. It's difficult to find a place that does the job I'm looking for.

#### **4. Reflection.**

A three-hour History Channel program on Easter presented the life of Jesus in its original setting with commentary by New Testament scholars, archeologists, and historians. It was an attempt to "get behind" the story and see what it meant to its authors. It was generally a fine documentary with realistic dramatization.

But it had one significant failing: it considered the gospels as if they were historical accounts rather than considering them from the point of view of the writer as expressions of his faith. The commentators were good historians and pointed out that the links between many of the stories about Jesus and Old Testament prophecies were intended to stress the importance of Jesus, not necessarily to record facts. They certainly emphasized the gruesomeness of the crucifixion and its contradiction to the image of "messiah" in the culture. [One then described it as evidence of "God's philanthropy," a term which left me mystified. It only makes sense if you believe in a substitutionary atonement theory which, I think, misrepresents the meaning of the story. But that's getting into theology.]

When it came to the resurrection, the historians were careful neither to affirm it as historical (though they quoted one who thought it was - "If you're going to make up a story to convince people Jesus was the Messiah, you certainly would not make up one so improbable as this." ) - nor to deny it. But they certainly affirmed that something happened to the dispersed disciples that forged them into an unstoppable

movement. What they missed was the fact that this story was written at least 40 years after the happening, whatever it was, and that it expressed the faith of the community. It was not recorded as a historical account but as an expression of faith. In any case, the pertinent issue is: what does the resurrection story say about faith?

I leave that for another paper.

## Thoughts on Reconciliation

The adversary mode permeates Western society, and through it, affects the globe. By "Adversary mode" I mean to point to those relations and patterns of response that assume opposition among differing parties or viewpoints. This mode has been the dominant form of relations, at least in the West, since humankind moved into agricultural society from nomadic existence. The struggle against the elements, against the soil, against the animals, and against intruding or attacking peoples placed one in a position of fighting for survival, and victory came to the strongest. With the industrial age came a new set of opponents: instead of the elements, it was the forces of the market; instead of the soil, it was the labor/management conflict; instead of literal attackers, it was the competition. Still victory belongs to the strongest, although strength is more often cleverness rather than brute force.

But something has happened in the last 20 years that makes the adversary mode strangely out of place, indeed, a perversity impeding civilization's march into the future. We have been thrust into a global civilization, a situation of interdependence, a state of affairs in which wiping out an opponent harms the victor as much as the victim. And more than that, we have been heir to a time of the most radical and rapid change that history has ever known. In this situation, the era of the Earthrise, adversariality is an anachronism. Further, it is a diversion from the task at hand and so an impediment to building the future.

Nevertheless it is ingrained in Western society as a presupposition to virtually every aspect of knowing and doing and being. In the learning enterprise, criticism and debate are dominant. Theories are set in opposition to theories as if some prize were to be won by the one that comes out on top. In this mode, the search for truth is hampered. In the fields of action, competition and conflict are dominant, whether it be in business, industry, politics, or even the human services. It's my business or process or ideology or agency over against yours with the prize being the funds to continue the opposition. In the area of being or style, aggressiveness or defensiveness are the predominant categories, and some superior self-hood the supposed prize.

In attempting to move beyond this Adversary Mode into a style of Reconciliation, it is advisable to examine more closely what is being rejected and what advocated.

The problem with the Adversary Mode is its systematic exclusion of the dissimilar. And this is problematic only because in a time of innovation, there is no RIGHT way with sufficient status to justify

exclusion. The time of new creation is a time of inclusiveness, of forging novel syntheses, "unholy coalitions," unexpected relations. In a time of radical change, old paradigms collapse and all things shimmer with potential. Enemies, competitors, allies, opponents, and colleagues all merge into an otherness that, together with my self-ness, has the potential of exceeding traditional conundrums and forging a future with mutual benefit. Adversariality, on the other hand, is concerned exclusively with the self, protecting and insuring it against possible harm. Ours is a time, however, when that cannot happen in isolation from the other, when the self is radically dependent on the other. It is a time when the adversary mode is outmoded.

But adversariality has generated the passion and commitment that brought civilization from the caves to the moon. It has performed exceedingly well, and it will not easily give way. Nor should it. For to move beyond the adversary mode is not to exclude its legitimacy, only to de-throne its pre-eminence.

One of the more romantic illusions afflicting the dis-establishment is that of tension-free existence, be it within the self (when I get my act together), within the family and community ("conflict mediation"), or among nations (disarmament). The curious depth of the adversarial mode is both that we cannot get away from it and that we cannot get along with it. For the one thing people today cannot seem to bear is IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES. We run. We hide. We pretend. We capitulate. We compromise. We dominate. We tyrannize. We exclude. But we simply do not know how to carry on a sustained relation in which the dominant note is difference.

That which is called for is reconciliation, a relationship in which two or more parties are 100% unified and at the same time totally and radically differentiated.

It starts, often as not, with a person. First there is the attraction of the other. This attraction, which includes both the similarities and the differences, allows one to overcome antipathy and to form a relation. It is the reconciliation of Romeo and Juliette, overcoming the antagonisms of the Montagues and the Capulets and creating a new relationship that finds in the other a complementary aspect. For the sake of the person, I am able to move beyond stereotypes and establish relations with what otherwise would be an enemy.

This, however, is only the first level. Persons are notoriously prone to shun our trust, to show up unworthy of our regard and to fail to reciprocate our admiration. In short, the attraction does not last. It will

initiate the most astounding diversity of relationships, but it will invariably disappear. The phenomenon of "second marriage" occurs after the attraction is gone from a relationship and one decides whether to continue or not. The decision, if it be to continue, is based on something entirely different, something that acknowledges the predominance of difference, of tension and struggle in the relationship and yet decides to continue. This is a further step in the direction of reconciliation.

This second level, often as not, is related to a cause. There is something to which I and the other are devoted, and in relation to it, we will set aside our differences and cooperate on a higher plane. In Western families, this is often regarded as "the children" for whose sake we will continue to live out the vows of marriage. Crises are often seen when the kids grow up and no basis is left for the family. Yet there are other causes or visions which are more lasting, and one of the weaknesses of Western family life is the failure to identify those common directions which will permit a couple to continue in marriage when the romance and the children are gone. But the fraternities of missional collegiality go beyond the family. They include the workplace, the community, and the nation. The difficulty here comes when that cause is an opponent to be defeated or a threat to be avoided. In a time of global interdependence, many of the old causes are gone, and the new ones are less opponents than visions. And we find them less compelling than a threat to our lives and property. Nevertheless, learning to live creatively without a threat is one of today's challenges.

Even the cause, however, requires a "second marriage." As the Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore put it, "The cause which seemed so glorious when seen from the lofty heights seems so muddy from the bottom." Each cause brings its own form of disillusionment. Perhaps it's that the glory of village development really means affixing postage stamps on a mailing to prospective donors. Or that being the religious essentially gets down to washing the dishes for lots of people. Or that the innocent suffering you are out to alleviate will continue undiminished long after you are dead.

At this point, something else is required. It often happens, just as in personal relationships, that people think something is wrong, that the journey has gone askew. And often people sever the relationship, become cynical or go off looking for another cause that will permit significant relations to go on. Some, however, do persist. But they do it without the luxury of the glorious affinity for the task. They know it for what it is yet they persist. The persistence in an ultimately unworthy cause is based on

something entirely other than convictions of the cause's value or its benefits to me. It is based on another level of reconciliation.

This third level is related to the Final Reality, that otherness that has seen to the demise of my attraction to particular people and of my affinity for glorious causes. That reality has exposed the depth of my antagonisms and of the adversariality in life: life is NOT friendly to my dispositions, and, indeed, will see to their frustration and to my demise. The paranoid is right - Final Reality is gonna getcha! And in the depth of struggling with that relationship, THERE is where reconciliation occurs. When the mysterious transformation occurs, as it does, making hell into heaven and enemy into Father, then reconciliation occurs with humankind. For all are likewise related to this Final Reality, and all are struggling the same struggle as I with coming to terms with That One's absolute sovereignty.

This reconciliation has something of the feel of hugging a porcupine; yet it is that alone which brings creative and lasting relationships in life. Once one not only perceives that life is dominated by the Final Reality, but goes through the journey of Enmity, Flight, Acknowledgement, and Confidence in this One, all other relationships take on a level of meaning and significance not before available. That person and that cause with which I am involved is not an isolated entity, but the vehicle through which I and the Final Reality are related.

But like the others, this level of reconciliation also involves the "second marriage." This time it is at the point of discovering God to be more my humiliator than my advocate. Better, discovering that acknowledgement of the Final Reality wins no brownie points, that fidelity to this One has no rewards and certainly guarantees no successes. At this point, the classics named it The Dark Night of the Soul; we have identified another aspect and termed it The Long March of Care. People experiencing these dynamics are in the struggle of reconciliation with Being-Itself.

When it occurs, there is the phenomenon of Adoration. And then every other relationship shimmers with potential. Knowing moves from criticism to synthesis; doing shifts from competition to cooperation; being changes from aggressiveness to appreciation. And all of this includes as very much a part of itself the differences and tensions that "normally" would justify ending the relation. But nothing here is "normal." All is new and in creation. One is privileged to be present to the processes of history. And in light of the ultimate struggle, differences are of little



consequence. One is freed to take them seriously without taking them ultimately.

# The Jesus Principle

## *Introduction*

In the sixties, James N. Robinson published The New Quest of the Historical Jesus in which he began with a statement of the possibility and necessity of such a task. Whereas his work was scholarly, logical and persuasive, it failed to excite much passion except among a few New Testament Scholars. Now, however, a set of forces have converged on the Church in her practical life and mission that makes Robinson's work prophetic. It is both possible and necessary to quest after the Man from Nazareth, though for rather different reasons than have been previously set forth. This paper consists of a brief historical sketch of the major developments in writings on Jesus, a description of factors in the present situation which occasion a renewed interest in Jesus, a statement of methodological presuppositions, and finally, a sketch of some of the results of initial probing in this arena.

## *Historical Background*

The theology of the 19th Century was dominated by the Liberal Movement. In part it was a reaction to 18th Century Orthodoxy and its emphasis on dogma, in part a response to the discoveries of science and the Enlightenment's emphasis on the human, in part a reflection of the new interest in history as "scientific" fact, and, significantly, in part a constructive contribution to issues arising out of the Church's breakloose in world mission. One of the mayor themes of the Liberals was the life of Jesus.

The effective end of that phase of liberalism was brought about by the publication in 1906 of Schweitzer's The Quest for the Historical Jesus<sup>34</sup>. In that book, which was a history of the writings on the life of Jesus, Schweitzer methodically demonstrated that the Lives of Jesus that had been written disclosed far more about their author and his times than they did about Jesus and his. The New Testament picture of Jesus was one of a man with a worldview and task coincident with his age and intrinsically foreign to a contemporary. From that point on, the distinction between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus or

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<sup>34</sup> Albert Schweitzer, The Quest for the Historical Jesus: From Reimarus to Wrede, transl. William Montgomery (London: A & C. Black, 1911)

the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith was firmly drawn. The former was all but inaccessible and the latter was all that mattered anyway. Neo-orthodoxy emerged stressing the Christ of Faith, and while Jesus' historical reality was firmly asserted, the content of that particular life was held to be nonessential to the faith of the contemporary believer.

The next major phase of the discussion occurred around the work of Bultmann. In his Form Critical work he was able to distinguish various layers of historical material in the scriptures and to discern an oldest strand which appeared to be authentic. His book Jesus and the Word<sup>35</sup> represents his findings in this field of investigation. A minor skirmish developed over the degree to which his historical skepticism was warranted, but the real warfare erupted over another issue, Bultmann, in his demythologizing campaign, seemed to be asserting both that the possibility of authentic faith was available to everyone quite apart from hearing about Jesus, and that such faith was a possibility in fact only in confrontation with the Christian Gospel. These two assertions appeared contradictory, and critics divided over which alternative to take<sup>36</sup>. This will emerge as an important point in the present situation. Meanwhile, however, Bultmann proceeded to erase the opposition between the religion of Jesus and the religion about Jesus by showing that the two bore precisely the same existential content. It was now possible to be nonchalant and intelligently secure in the faith even while the historians and theologians were wrangling over the truth. No one was ever comfortable with the notion that faith's validity hinged on the outcome of historical criticism, but Bultmann's work removed that discomfort completely.

Meanwhile several other trends were in process. Buri and Ogden took Bultmann's first option and proceeded to develop theologies of faith as available simply to everyone. The happening of the Christ event was a happening in humanness itself not limited to members of a particular historic tradition. Whereas that possibility for human existence was decisively represented in the New Testament, it was certainly not limited to Christians. Existentialism and Process Philosophy provided the intellectual undergirding for their work. This is important in that it offered the way to communicate the faith that did not presuppose either a particular history or a two-story world-picture.

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<sup>35</sup> Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribners, 1934, 1958)

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Schubert Ogden, *Christ Without Myth: A Study based on the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann* (New York: Harper Collins, 1962)

Other scholars proceeded with the New Testament criticism and, using the method of redactional criticism, reconstructed the theological positions of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. Now it was possible to determine how different writers shaped their material and thus to locate with even more certainty the earliest strain.

Then emerged the New Quest of the Historical Jesus<sup>37</sup> represented by Robinson's work but by no means limited to it. There is a real possibility of obtaining historical knowledge of Jesus that would stand firm under the scrutiny of the most critical secular historian. Furthermore, such knowledge was necessary to prevent Christian faith from lapsing into abstraction and to serve as a norm for the faithful. The "what" of Jesus cannot be a matter of indifference to those addressed by his "that." Others are interested in finding a more accessible way to communicate the faith than the tortuous route of de- and re-mythologizing the Church's creeds. This trend, as all the others, has been rooted in an evangelistic approach to the world. By and large, however, the evangelical intent has also been apologetic: how to communicate one's Christian faith to the intelligent nonbeliever or critic

### *The Present Situation*

Now a new set of forces has converged on the Church that moves this history a giant step forward. In the present, trends and relationships are difficult to discern: it is experienced as a swirl of events which occasion a breakthrough. This section, therefore, will be a listing of certain forces rather than an attempt to explore their interconnections and underlying unity.

1. The secular, scientific, urban worldview has won the globe. However it has happened, everywhere in the world people acknowledge this world to be of such nature that scientists describe. Interestingly enough, as this revolution has run its course the initial enthusiasm (or dread) with which it was greeted has been replaced by the awareness that the mysterious or awesome dimension of life has not vanished. Our new grasp of reality has not done away with depth, nor has it made humans master of all things. Indeed within the contemporary picture of the world, the unexplainable mysteries of nature and human behavior are perhaps even more vividly present than in a time

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<sup>37</sup> James Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1983)

when incursions of supernatural forces were regarded as commonplace. In any event, the important thing is that now the globe shares a world-picture, and that picture is informed by science and the urban culture. And it is secular in the sense of having long forgotten any literal "two-story" image of reality

2. The geographic isolation of cultures has ended. Rapid communications and travel have brought the world's peoples into contact with each other. The moon landing and photographs of Earth have impacted the consciousness of everyone, but even more important, that consciousness has taken practical shape. The multinational corporations have done what the UN could not do: given practical form to global interdependence. Recent oil crises and ecological concerns have further dramatized the practical importance of thinking and acting with the world as a context.
3. Theology has made a shift. Whereas academic theology has gone into a kind of dormancy since the mid-sixties, the theological reflection that has occurred at the Ecumenical Institute: Chicago has been momentous for the current time. Three themes have recurred over the past five years: The Other World, Sanctification, and Profound Consciousness. Their significance rather than their content will be the topic of this paper.
  - a. The "Other World" has been used as a metaphor to describe the states of consciousness or states of being that one experiences in the midst of everyday pursuits. Important to note is that these "states" simply do occur and cannot be sought or produced anywhere but in the midst of "This World." The drug cult and other consciousness expanding fads ignore this fundamental fact: "The Other World is in the midst of this World." But for our purposes, the significance of this work has been to provide a language in which to discuss the deeps of life that does not depend on a particular historical tradition or experience or education. It is the language of ontology made accessible to everyone
  - b. Studies in the arena of sanctification and the spirit journey have recovered the insight that "conversion" or justification is not the end but the beginning of the life of faith. This insight does not mean that justification is not a constant necessary recurrent happening. Indeed H.R. Niebuhr's notion of perpetual revolution in both personal and social arenas is everywhere affirmed. But the important thing is that approaching the question of Jesus from the perspective of justification is not the only possible approach, and

indeed it may lead to the impasse of hinging faith on historical research or on a particular tradition.

- c. Further work on the phenomenology of profound consciousness has explored faith, hope and love as human experience without diminishing their "given" character. Again it is possible to "see through" the Christian religious language to the human depth to which it points and to communicate this depth to and with a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Hindu, etc

These three breakthroughs taken together have removed the basis of a Christian Bigotry that assumes authenticity resides only among members of a particular community and reduces conversion to the adoption of one historical religion. "Conversion means changed lives, lives changed profoundly and practically, and that cannot be restricted to those who recite the Boy Scout Oath like I.<sup>38</sup>"

4. Finally, the mission of the Church has turned to the global practicality of human development. The Church has turned to the world. At the World Council of Churches meeting in Nairobi in 1975, matters of consuming interest included minority rights, third world development, and the struggle for liberation against unjust social structures. The intent of the Church is to be of service to the world, and it acknowledges itself in this regard to be in common with peoples of many religions, ideologies and cultures. In the Institute of Cultural Affairs, this commonness has been dramatically experienced in Social Demonstration projects around the world. In 5-day on location consultations, people of many fields of expertise meet together with local villagers in an underdeveloped area and corporately build a plan for rapid development. Many cultures, geographic areas and faiths are represented, and in the midst of intensive work in the social arena, lives are profoundly changed, differences lose their divisiveness and a consciousness of the depths of life emerges. The difficulty comes at the point of giving dramatic or liturgical expression to the reality that is present. At this time the available vehicles for expression come from divided religious traditions. There may be no way around this impasse, but one theological task of the present is to enable the traditions to express the

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<sup>38</sup> See Joseph Mathews, "Transpandane Christianity," in *Bending History* op. cit., pp. 245ff.

reality that is present rather than to hinder its expression. A further task is to clarify the dynamics of lives being profoundly changed quite apart from religious expression. These are constructive tasks, not apologetic ones. The question is to bring clarity to an observable phenomenon, not to explain a tenant of one's beliefs to a skeptical audience.

In the midst of these forces, a reexamination and appropriation of the life of Jesus is very much in order. For Jesus occasioned profoundly changed lives. While operating within one particular historical religion, he saw through its trappings to the profound depths they encased. And he was so able to communicate this reality that his followers invented a new mythological vehicle designed to function in the common worldview of the times and therefore to include people of many traditions. But the Church's paradigm for human fulfillment was Jesus. When people sought ways to relate to their experience of life's fearfulness and fascination, the Church pointed to Jesus as one "like us in every respect, only without sin."

Who, then, was this Jesus? What was the reality he stood before? What was his spirit journey? How did he catalyze changed lives? How did he sustain his drive? What was the quality of his doing? What were discernible components of his presence? What are the implications of these answers for our time?

## *Methodological Considerations*

The basic approach to this work depends on identification with Jesus in reading the Scriptures. Most often the disciples or others in the audience are objects of readers' identification simply because their actions and responses are more easily recognizable. That procedure, however, is likely to lead to the conclusion that Jesus as a man, a doer, and a teacher is essentially foreign to human nature: either we are so "sinful" or he was so "holy" that he is understood as a figure foreign to ordinary human experience. The Church, however, has always declared the opposite: he IS human nature in its fullness and authenticity. The starting point for this study thus presents Jesus as myself: what is depicted in Scripture is just that which I have done, been, and said. Jesus is neither a moral pattern nor an abstract ideal: he is I in my depth humanness. Adopting this approach requires effort, and a practical exercise in incorporating it would be to paraphrase John 14:17 with oneself as the speaker.

The second methodological presupposition, closely related to the first, is that the picture of Jesus be regarded as indicative, not imperative and not ideal. This means that The Man in the New Testament is a portrayal of my experience in its depth and fullness. This is the point of identification that makes a contemporary reading of the New Testament both possible and profitable. It does not require familiarity with ancient languages or cultures, nor does it demand a particular philosophical training. One's own life is the keystone for grasping the picture of Jesus and its significance for the present.

In the third place, the quest for Jesus comes from the question of the shape of authentic life more than the question of how one comes to faith (authenticity). The latter question has been the preoccupation of Protestant theology since the Reformation despite Luther's injunction that we are to be "little Christs." This preoccupation has led to the placing of Jesus at the center of faith and the consequent exclusion from the fellowship of the faithful of those of other heritages. But when asking about the dimensions of human authenticity, the other question with its attendant biases vanishes.

Finally, one approaches the New Testament assuming the full humanity of Jesus. That is, elements of humiliation, resentment, weakness, rootlessness, weariness, ineffectivity and frustration are all recognized as components of the experience of a Jesus who fully participated in humanity. The New Testament rarely dwells on these matters, but neither does it consign them to inauthenticity.



Acknowledging this fact enables one to grasp the New Testament as presenting a live option for relating to these commonplace experiences, not the pseudo-alternative of avoiding them.

Moving through the layers of tradition in the New Testament to reach The Man is a complicated process. Each stage rests on the phenomenological method suggested above. First it is necessary to discern the empirical reality the Church experienced as it encountered the gospels. Material for this task is the latest strain in the gospels and usually reflects creedal motifs editorially added to the tradition. Secondly, it is necessary to seek the empirical reality the writers experienced as they confronted The Man. This stage is complicated because of the multitude of sources used by the different writers in compiling their accounts and even the uncertainty as to which of the gospel writers preceded which. Yet the bearers of the early tradition encountered some reality which impelled them to action. Finally, using the best available critical wisdom on the earliest material, it is necessary to inquire about the reality experienced by The Man as he moved through life

It should be noted that the final product of this "quest" is less a matter of historical "fact" than of contemporary illumination. In this it is no different from earlier attempts to write a life of Jesus. And like the others, the motivation of the quest will shape its results. But any attempt to achieve a purely objective, non-historical stance is neither possible nor particularly interesting. The present situation, however, needs the illumination such a study can provide. Only the results will determine how successful was the quest. What follows are some suggestive, preliminary findings that illustrate the first step of the procedures outlined above.

## *Preliminary Findings*

"He spoke with authority." Jesus' words received agreement because they dealt with the profound consciousness of everyone, not with debatable intellectual issues. Such speech derives from perception of reality in its depth and discernment of its practical consequences. Against such speech there is no rebuttal, and he is often presented as silencing opponents who raise criticisms from the point of authoritarian traditions.

His deeds were "miracles." They brought a dimension of wonder into ordinary situations that occasioned an unexpected alteration of the situation and resulted in profoundly changed lives. The magical elements recorded in Scripture need not hinder the contemporary reader from discerning components of Jesus doing that are applicable today. His deeds were the opposite of the slow, pedantic, bureaucratic procedures to which we are accustomed. The Man appeared and things happened. They happened with lasting effectiveness because both the profound and the practical dimensions were touched.

His presence was awesome. Somehow he so communicated the presence of the ultimate mystery of life that merely touching the hem of his garment occasioned transformation. Communicating or bearing the awe is a human experience, and social roles have been assigned to carry out this function (shaman, priest, saint, magician, etc.). Usually, however, the possibility of everyone being transparent to the profound mystery of life has been minimized. But just this is the consequence of taking seriously the life of Jesus as a human model. Probably the communication of awe today is a corporate, not an individual, function, although there will always be charismatic personalities among us. But the team, the disciplined task force, the religious order - these seem today best to embody a style transparent to Being itself.

Jesus was a man of profound faith. Not only was he conscious of the raw, capricious mysteriousness of life, but he also trusted that one. Not only was a "not-me-ness" in charge, that very "not-me-ness" is "Father." Thus is disclosed the depth of profound consciousness: utter confidence in the terrifying reality discerned to be at the heart of life. Precisely that faith, as a happening that one can neither earn nor achieve but only acknowledge, is the content of salvation, and it depends on no creedal affirmations whatsoever. At best they are its poetic expression; at worst, its impediment. Usually that faith is catalyzed in an encounter with one who embodies it as (s)he demonstrates its practical transformation of the given situation. This may take many practical

forms: discerning realistic possibility when all options appear closed; injecting ultimate significance into an apparently trivial situation; or relegating to irrelevancy paralyzing self-doubt by laying on an overwhelming demand. All of these are simply outward manifestations of a basic confidence in the final mystery of life.

Jesus was a man of profound love. His sphere of active concern moved far beyond family, friends and followers. He also cared for "the least of these." This, too, is at the heart of humanness. People care. We often go to great lengths to hide from the extent of this concern, but often as not this is due to a lack of a concrete way to act out our passion effectively. Once the way is provided, one will give up all possessions, move into the most undesirable circumstances, face the most scathing criticisms, risk the most overwhelming odds, and finally give up life itself on behalf of service to humankind. And in the midst of practical struggles for effective action, one manifests a peace that, to all outward appearances, "passeth all understanding." But that peace comes only in active, effective care for all that is.

Jesus was a man of profound hope. His was the hope that "appeareth" when faith and love are intensified. It was not hope for the world ("In this world you will have trouble, but fear not I have overcome the world."), but hope in Being. This hope "appeareth" at just the point where all hopes are dashed, when there is nothing left to hope for. It was the hope against and beyond hope as if Being itself were hoping through him. And whereas this hope had neither logical basis nor social function, it nonetheless left its residues in the movement in history that is the Christian religion. Occasions of hope's appearance are occasions of radical social rebirth, but it is not the hope that "causes" the change. The hope is rather the wellspring of unfettered creativity from which the new in personal and social life emerges.

So who is this Jesus? He's the one in whom we encounter the ultimate Mystery of Life - God. He's also the one in whom the paradigm of full humanness is manifest.

## **Chapter Four:**

# **Mystery in History: The Spirit of the Times**

## Introduction

Most people who undertake to write theological works attempt to make the Christian Faith intelligible to the contemporary age. This, of course, requires some grasp of the worldview of the times.

But it's not only the cosmological picture of the universe that is needed. So too is an acute sense of the underlying questions and quests of the age, and these shift with some frequency. When faith-statements are put into intelligible terms, they need to address the spirit concerns of the age if they are to be regarded as relevant as well as intelligible.

For more than 40 years I have attempted to analyze the current decade and to discern the existential questions that each poses. In doing this, I have been greatly informed by work from the Ecumenical Institute. Categories used there continue to be informative. The basic outline of the following four essays uses the categories taken, according to EI, from the works of Kierkegaard. Put in a sentence, they are: "External events create internal crises which raises existential questions from which we try to escape."

You will see from these essays that the categories produced some useful insights into the spirit of the times, and therefore the environment which theology needs to address.

As you might expect, the "moods" described have a sort of cumulative, developmental content. But they are not simply sequential. Each decade has its unique flavor, and while it may incorporate elements of its predecessor, it is still unique. Any of us may identify more closely with the spirit of a decade other than the one we're in, and that illustrates the fact that these delineations are, at best, provisional. But I have found them helpful.

Previous chapters illustrate my efforts, sometimes unconsciously, to address the existential questions of the times.

## The Spirit of the 80s

In the 70s we experienced **Expanded Horizons**. The world was found to be interdependent. The oil crisis and the Vietnam War both made it clear that no one operates in isolation. Our internal experience was **Unity**. We were impressed with the essential humanity of people everywhere, and even came to see the environment as a living thing with whom we are interdependent. All are ONE in some sense. The existential question was **How Can I Participate?** With all that is going on that I play a part in, how can I get my insights in? Some even defined the moral issue of the times as the gap between the 15% (whose participation amounted to control) and the 85% (who were left out).

This was the issue addressed so beautifully with the Technology of Participation, ToP® facilitation methods. We not only developed ways for large groups of people to build consensus. We also put those methods into practice through human development projects around the world, through consultations with major private sector organizations, and through Town Meetings in small communities around the world. What we finally discovered was that the methods work spectacularly. But participation ultimately means taking responsibility FOR that in which you would participate. If all you want is to get good ideas to the “real” leaders, then you’re forever an outsider. You participate with your life or you don’t participate; instead you can write frustrated letters to editors. Many people escape from this existential question and its demanding answer. They **Withdraw**, whether into the outback of the Rockies re-inventing pioneer-style self-realization or into drugs searching for a cheap euphoria.

In the 80s the experience is different. We have experienced **Collapsed Boundaries**. Differences which were once kept apart (by space, time, culture, economics, politics, lifestyle etc.) are now thrown together into a jumble of languages, values, habits, styles, ethics, and expectations. The internal experience is **Chaos**: sheer, irreconcilable otherness at every turn. It’s the Tower of Babel all over again! Instead of conflict resolution these days, you get terrorism – there seems to be no basis on which to resolve the differences, or common ground on which to stand, excepting, perhaps, our common experience of diversity. The existential question is **Integrity: Where do I stand?** Where is my consecration? What does my life stand for? This is not the vocational question of what to do with my energies. It is a prior and deeper question of values and causes and meaning. With the plethora of options, where DO I stand? The escape is into **Fanaticism**, which provides a place to

stand at the expense of diversity. The fanatic has a standpoint, but rejects every one different from her/his own. Fanaticism ranges from the blatant despot who sets out to abolish anything that looks different, to the closet bigot whose stance is "Let everyone do their own thing - and don't bother me in mine!" Both are escapes from diversity.

Now perhaps the moral issue of the 80s has to do with refusing diversity. Reconciliation is the alternative so rarely taken. Perhaps our task is to invent and to propagate a "technology of reconciliation" in which diverse viewpoints are honored and upheld in a complex whole. Methods of interchange are steps in that direction, and they can be life-giving. When people are able to talk from their experience, then they can listen to and learn from the experience of other people without defense and with respect.

Reconciliation, however, is deeper than listening, just as participation is deeper than offering opinions. The curious depth of reconciliation is service; there is no authentic getting together apart from providing service. Groups, organized just to be groups, have a notoriously short life span. Differences quickly become intolerable without some external reference point for the sake of which all consent to work together. A unifying "cause" to be served provides the necessary rallying point for groups of the most outstanding diversity. Just as participation in the 70s demanded responsibility, so in the 80s the longed-for-reconciliation demands service.

Service in this sense refers to the honoring, empowering, eliciting, and valuing that which is DIFFERENT. In occasions of service, the one who is served is not subjugated and demeaned as incapable of self-sufficiency. Rather one is empowered, applauded and absolved in one's unique particularity. Genuine service comes when systems that blur distinctions are transcended. To serve, one calls out the distinctions and honors them precisely as distinctions.

So what does one serve? Not the vile, the trivial, or the mean, which also manifest themselves in us all. Nor does one serve some abstract ideal of virtue supposedly latent in us all. Service is not providing people their "wants" nor is it bludgeoning them with their "needs." Service provides occasions and conditions for one who is not-me to fulfill that otherness with rigor and responsibility, not to hide it in dependence and shame. Service is the demand that the other take full responsibility for that self. Service creates the opposite of resentful dependence. It creates selfhood and integrity. And all it takes is to recognize and honor that which is not-me.

The demonstration of this type reconciliation is a group of diverse people who render effective service, primarily to society and secondarily to each other. It is not a demonstration of possibility for a group to allow each other to do whatever they like; it may be an easy way to avoid troublesome arguments, but no more. That is a step backwards from integrity. Nor is it a demonstration to get like-minded people together to do their thing; it may get something done, but it avoids the real issue of diversity.

What just might address the 80s is a group of people of mixed background and culture, who live and work in response to the major contradictions of their time and place, and whose life and work renders an effective address to those contradictions. Internally, they study, celebrate and hold each other accountable; externally, they develop and carry out programs to address specific needs. Sometimes those programs are done in partnership with other organizations similarly concerned; but the partnership is for the sake of the task and does not necessarily indicate adoption of the partners' perspectives. We have our own integrity, too.



## The Spirit of the 90s

**THESIS:** The 90s promise to be a decade of focus on the intangibles. Effective leaders will be those at home beyond the material/rational, but lucid about it. Lurking dangers of fanaticism, anomie, and subjectivity will vex us, but it's a time for grand schemes and great causes that put spice into the life of everyone.

### *The End of the 80s*

The 80s are over. So also is the spirit "mood" they brought. During that decade we faced an external situation of **Collapsed Boundaries**. We achieved the promise of the "Earthrise" photo of 1969: a singleness of humanity. Better, we achieve the removal of barriers to singleness. Spatial, political, racial, economic, and cultural boundaries dissolved during the decade and we found ourselves in a new situation.

This precipitated an internal crisis: we were up against **Inescapable Diversity**. Wherever we turned, we were faced with people whose values and practices not only were different from our own but which were in direct opposition to what we held most dear. Enclaves of like-minded people became fewer as distances were bridged by transportation and communications breakthroughs. It was no longer possible to believe that the culture and values and principles that were mine were the only ones operating in the world. This was an advance of mixed consequences.

It triggered in people the existential question: **Where Do I Stand?** In the midst of the numerous alternatives for values, lifestyles, family patterns, religions, communities, to what will I be committed? Virtually everything one might claim to cherish had groups actively opposing it and claiming the opposite to be the true humanity. Rock music, jeans, and computers became the global commonality, and even these had their opponents.

People tended to evade the pressure of this question through an escape into **Mindless Relativism**. Well documented by Alan Bloom in *Closing of the American Mind*<sup>39</sup>, the notion that "everything is relative" became our obsession (a notion the truth of which can never be established without disclosing its falsity). We gave up the responsibility

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<sup>39</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

for deciding among options and its attendant requirement to live within our decisions and their implications. To decide, not only that something is OK for me now, but that it is RIGHT in some more comprehensive sense seemed to imply a hopeless fanaticism. Of course it needn't: bigotry is not the necessary consequence of conviction. But we tended to forgo conviction and with it, any standpoint. **Integrity** was the major spirit issue of the 80s, and examples of it in individual or corporate situations were rare.

The destruction of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern European revolution was the grand finale of the 80s, though few would have anticipated this collapse of one of the most defended boundaries separating humankind. Now the 90s: What shall we anticipate from them?

Another quiet revolution has been festering for some time and promises to make this decade one with nuances of its own. Perhaps it can be seen through some of the threads leading in the new direction. Its impact and implications are, of course, still in their infancy. But perhaps we may be able to discern some arenas which the 90s will embellish.

### *The 90s: The Era of Intangibles*

Physics has been one source of the new consciousness sweeping humanity. It has discovered that in the macro and micro spheres, matter is not what it seems, that in fact there may be no such thing as matter in the ordinary "material" sense. Instead, insubstantial energy seems the paramount reality involving everything from black holes to holograms.<sup>40</sup> The shift of attention has been away from the material and logical realms into the realms of the invisible, the potential, and the intuitive. This shift has led several notable physicists into Eastern Religious Mysticism.

Technology has followed suit and brought about inconceivable advances in communications and data manipulation. Now information can be instantaneously transmitted world-wide, a factor which has reshaped business operations and made time and space assets rather than constraints.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps more pertinent than technology has been the recovery of the "softer" elements of business and the insistence that they become paramount factors. Leadership is now defined in terms of Vision, a factor

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<sup>40</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988)

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Davis, *Future Perfect* (Reading Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1987)

which is shown to exert considerable power on an organization.<sup>42</sup> Motivation is discussed in terms not of incentive or reward, but of purpose, mission, and fulfillment.<sup>43</sup> Companies are described in full seriousness as “Learning Organizations”<sup>44</sup> based on spirit.<sup>45</sup> Innovation and creativity are regarded as principle virtues to be cultivated, and “right-brain” thinking is what successful people do<sup>46</sup>. The way to keep fit is through various forms of meditation<sup>47</sup>, and serious businessmen take counsel from the likes of *The Tao of Leadership* by John Heider<sup>48</sup>. The present editor of Harvard Business Review is author of *When Giants Learn to Dance*<sup>49</sup>. This is a new world in which quality and service are assuming the priorities formerly devoted to productivity and profit.<sup>50</sup> Ronnie Lessem speaks of corporations needing “alignment and attunement” among employees in order to be more human.<sup>51</sup>

If the non-material has emerged in science, technology and business, so also has it reared its head in medicine. In fact the preventive health movement is not new. What is new is the current range of practices involving relaxation therapy, diet, visualization, and forms of meditation in the treatment of everything from stress to cancer. The mind-body continuum is regarded as the source of health and illness, and neither

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Fritz, “The Leader as Creator” in John d. Adams, ed., *Transforming Leadership: Form Vision to Results* (Alexandria, VA: Miles River, 1988)

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Frederick Hertzberg, “Motivation One More Time Around” *Harvard Business Review* September-October 1987; Lawrence Miller, *American Spirit: Visions of a New Corporate Culture* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984); Kate Ludeman, *The Worth Ethic: How to Profit From the Changing Values of the New Work Force* (New York: Dutton, 1989)

<sup>44</sup> Willis Harmon, “For A New Society, a New Economics” see [www.scottlondon.com/interviews/harman.html](http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/harman.html)

<sup>45</sup> Deal & Kennedy, *Corporate Culture :The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life* (New York: Perseus Publishing, 1982); Harrison Owen, *Spirit: Transformation and Development in Organizations* (Potomac, Md.:Abbott Publishing, 1987)

<sup>46</sup> Edward DeBono’s numerous works promote ways of developing this capacity.

<sup>47</sup> Ray and Meyers, *Creativity in Business* (New York: Broadway Books, 1986)

<sup>48</sup> John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching Adapted for A New Age* (Atlanta: Humanics New Age, 1985)

<sup>49</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *When Giants Learn to Dance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989)

<sup>50</sup> Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988)

<sup>51</sup> Ronnie Lessem, *Global Management Principles* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1989)

aspect can be treated in isolation from the other. Likewise intervention on either affects both.

In cultures, we are seeing the rise of conservative Islam throughout Southeast Asia and the Middle East, while the West is experiencing a new respect for conservative Christianity. The breakdown of the family seems to be tapering off and a new respect for marriage as an institution, emerging. The sexual anomie of the past few decades seems to be coming to an end, perhaps enhanced by the AIS phenomenon.

Attention is being placed on the Feminine dynamics. Movies such as "When Harry Met Sally" and the "Steel Magnolia" play up the "Old Girl" phenomenon, whereas in previous times it was the "Old Boy" network that was displayed. Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*<sup>52</sup> disclosed the power and dominance of femininity during significant portions of history and offers an option not usually noted.

Environmental concern seems to be rising, but it is more manifestation of a greater sense of unity with the cosmos than a fear of annihilation.

It's the time of the **Primacy of the Intangibles**, and it's generating a new way of thinking.

### *Dangers: Fanaticism, Anomie, & Subjectivism*

This is not history's first burst of enthusiasm for things of the spirit, and perhaps we can learn from some of those of the past.

The move into a time of the intangibles is not necessarily an unmixed blessing. Its traps may not be the greed and escapism that marks materialism, but they are no fewer and no less vicious. The growing prevalence of drugs and urban crime in the West means that the 90s are not likely to be utopian. Particular dangers to be aware of are: fanaticism, anomie, and subjectivity.

One tends to elevate his or her own access to the realm of Spirit into a universal "path" available to all. This is a fallacy; it overlooks the fact that this access works mainly because of its appropriateness for the person using it. In a time of differences, meditation, for example, may not be the appropriate or only route to authenticity (relaxation, motivation, creativity, or whatever) for everyone. Surely one of the learnings of

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<sup>52</sup> Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History Our Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987)

history (and physics) is that energy/spirit manifests itself in many different ways.

One tends to vilify structures in favor of the less substantial "soft" factors. The "care and feeding" of organizations, made a fetish in times past, gets ignored or deliberately disrupted. "Spirit" binds us in invisible "networks" and we feel no need for structures. But in fact structures are the vessels of spirit and are animated by it. The spirit is primary, but it does not necessarily lead to anarchy; it is still important to preserve the structural.

Standards tend to become excessively subjective. What is true and good and right and moral is cut lose from all objective references. Appeals to reason carry no weight, and in fact are renounced as "heretical." Power becomes the broker of disputes, and minorities tend to be oppressed.

Materialism arises frequently as a corrective to spirituality-gone-berserk. The Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century came into Europe as a recovery of reason and the material following the devastating wars of religion during the 17<sup>th</sup>. Certainly one of the consequences of the Enlightenment was to put into a more humane perspective the "spiritual" factors that were generating havoc in civilization.

### ***Opportunity: Fizz and Mischief***

At the same time, the primacy of spirit tends to generate exciting and energizing times. People develop commitments and passions. Worlds are conquered, arts thrive, heroes emerge, myths arise, and impossible tasks are undertaken. Personal risks are taken in the name of great and noble causes, and people once again find a depth of meaning denied by excessive materialism. "Who Am I?" and "What Do I?" and "How Be I?" and "Where Stand I?" are all submerged as existential questions when one is caught up in a valiant crusade for a grand conviction.

Perhaps this is the decade to populate the moon or to revamp the ecology or to abolish war or to eradicate disease or to irrigate the desert. It is certainly not a time of stagnation of mind or body.

### ***Leaders: In-Touch Visionaries***

To survive the shift we need statements of the grand cause, compelling visions of what can be, significant myths of the numinous potential we have stumbled upon, and spiritual guides to locate safe

passages through the moral maze of the decade. It's a time for the prophets; the time of the priests is over. In the era of the insubstantial, it's those whose home is the other world that are the best guides for this one.

It helps, however, to have prophets who know the lay of the land, that is, who are not totally divorced from the world of materiality and rationality. We don't need another Khomeni; we could use a handful of Gandhis. That is, the one whose spiritual counsel is worthy of attention is the one whose spirituality shows fruit in this world. Mother Teresa is of a different caliber from Maharishi. Distinguishing between true and false prophets has always been a trying task; personal charisma doesn't seem to be an adequate criterion.

In developing the new leaders, then, we need people who are keenly attuned to the intangible "cultural" factors in organizations and who are skilled at shaping them; but we also need people who are in touch with the times, the technology, the "material" aspects of life and who can unite the two in creative ways.

It's a tall order for the 90s.

## The Spirit of the 00s

We once analyzed the spirit mood of the times through these categories: An External Situation creates an Internal Crisis, which raises an Existential Question from which we try to Escape.

In the 80s the External Situation was the *collapse of boundaries*. We were suddenly into a global situation in which communication was instant, travel was fast and frequent, and borders became increasingly permeable. This created the Internal Crisis of *inescapable diversity*. Whereas once we lived with like-minded people, now multi-cultural situations in the community and workplace were the rule rather than the exception. This raised the Existential Question of *Where do I stand?* It was a question of what is "right" when so many different answers were manifest. We escaped through *mindless relativism*. Instead of thinking through a position and holding it as one among many, we chose to avoid the issue and regard everything as equally valid. While tolerance and respect are important qualities, we tended to negate the differences as if they made no real difference.

The 90s were a time in which the External Situation featured an emphasis on the *intangibles*. People were concerned with values and principles. Companies took care to define their mission and vision in noble terms. This raised the Internal Crisis of *meaning* as people tried to relate their personal quest to the society in which they lived. This raised the Existential Question of *"What am I worth?"* We escaped through *spiritualism*. This was the era of New Age prominence. It wasn't exactly religious fervor that drove people. It was more an attempt to find a quick solution to the quest for personal significance.

Now we're into the 00s. The External Situation is a *collapse of stabilizing structures* (economic, political and cultural - 9-11 is a symbol of a much wider collapse). The economic structures collapsed when the dot-com bubble burst, the recession hit, jobs were lost, and the Enron/Dot-Com scandals occurred. That has even hit Martha Stewart and Arthur Andersen. Recently the sub-prime mortgage crisis and the soaring oil prices have threatened economic security. Economic structures clearly showed their vulnerability. Perhaps one of the most telling indicators of this collapse is the current trend of outsourcing work overseas. While it makes good economic sense and is a direct consequence of living in a global society, still it means that jobs are lost, and the people losing them are not at all happy. The emergence of China

and India into the economic world, which represents a massive lessening of global poverty, comes more as a threat than an occasion for rejoicing.

The political collapse came with the USA elections of 2000 and was confirmed with the pullout from global treaties, and the unilateral invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The installation of George W. Bush as president, despite receiving a minority of popular votes, showed a real flaw in the USA's structures of democracy. The flaw was turned into intense irony when "Furthering Democracy" became Bush's rallying cry. Internationally, we've seen the recent Kosovo-Serbia wars and massacres, and genocide in Rwanda and the Dafur region of Sudan. While there have always been occasions of war, these events occurred under the watchful eyes of designated "Peacekeepers." Particularly revealing of the vicious circle that is occurring is the attempted dismantling of Social Security by the Administration. Political structures, including the UN, just don't seem to work very well.

And the cultural - perhaps the Roman Catholic Church's disclosure of pedophilia in the priesthood can symbolize that. Churches, once deemed leaders of the culture, find themselves caught up in fierce controversy over homosexuality and so relegated to the periphery of society, while others take on critical issues of environmental protection, drug addiction, and education reform. You can also find collapse in the Superbowl's halftime show! And baseball, the national sport, is being portrayed as fraught with drug-enhanced players. Cultural structures, even the "pop" ones, just don't seem to hold noble values any more.

What's happening is not that the structures collapse literally, but rather that their trustworthiness has been radically called into question. They're still around, but not providing us any stability or security.

Our Internal Crisis in all this is *security*. The structures that once provided a measure of stability and predictability are increasingly unreliable. We don't have anything to count on as a shield against chaos, and that occasions a high level of anxiety. So we hawk security, as though a new cabinet post or new airport inspections could protect us from - what? This is a serious internal crisis. When all our security structures fall apart, we see chaos everywhere. Our latest name for it is "terrorism," and it's something greatly feared. To provide a perspective on terrorism, note that there are more deaths from traffic accidents on a holiday weekend than there have been from terrorism in the USA in the past 10 years. But our traffic system still works, so it doesn't occasion fear. But our security systems, be they economic, political or cultural, seem not to work and leave us fearful.



And this raises the Existential Question of "*What can I trust?*" This is not a question about the integrity of organizations. That question is quite superficial compared to the intensity of a search for some protection, some assurance of stability, some reliable object for my confidence.

Of course there is none, nor has there ever been. This is the implication of being finite creatures. But we've built massive and deep-rooted structures to guard us from that awareness, and now they are coming un-glued. It's a terrifying time.

We escape that question and its accompanying fear through *belligerence*. When our sacred cows get hit, we yell bloody murder! I'm quite amazed at the level of anger that came into the political scene in the USA during the 2004 elections. But you see it in other realms as well – the fear and hatred thinly disguised as religious fundamentalism and the malevolence of virus-creators and spam mongers. The riots at sporting events are further examples of belligerence as a prevalent style. This doesn't even mention the explicitly belligerent views of the "hawks" in the international scene that are not simply limited to the Pentagon in Washington.

While these illustrations are heavily Western, I believe you can find the same dynamics operating elsewhere. Take the Palestinians, for example. Obviously their economy has collapsed. Their political structure, as soon as it's set up, is taken apart again, either because of internal struggles or by the Israelis. Their culture seems devoid of significating power. So with the crisis of security and no answer to "What can I trust?" there is a turn to suicide bombings. Which, of course, work only to exaggerate the conditions that caused them in the first place. I'd be willing to contend that terrorism is a manifestation of this spirit mood in its escape mode.

What would it mean to trust that which takes out of being all those structures that provide some measure of security against the lurking chaos in which we live? What would it mean to regard that One as "My Father?" That's the question of God in our time.

Addressing that question is another matter. In the 80's with the rampant diversity, we could highlight the possibility of collaboration, and so demonstrate the efficacy of respect and inclusion. Collaborative efforts with participation from diverse viewpoints became a cutting edge, and it was at this time that facilitation began its rise into prominence.

In the 90's with the quest for meaning, we could demonstrate the depth of whatever we happened to be doing by highlighting its

significance, artistry, and/or purpose. Numerous methods exist to get beneath the surface and encounter a profound dimension in whatever we do. If that depth seemed excessively elusive, then many people "moved on" to other endeavors. This was a time when "Do what you love" became a mantra for vocational counseling.

In an environment of hostility and fear, neither collaboration nor probing depths seem to address the issue. This may be the time for new myths. Certainly the popularity of Da Vinci Code and Harry Potter indicate receptiveness to a re-working of the mythical dimension. The fact that "Spamalot," a Monty Python take off of the Arthurian legend, won a Tony award for best musical indicates something. Maybe this is the time for stories that refine, update, and revise our traditional myths of meaning and re-tell what it's like to live authentically in a world where security is not available.

## The Spirit of the 10s

We have made a practice of looking at the various decades and seeking their underlying spirit quest. We have used the categories of **External Situation** which creates an **Internal Crisis** that leads to an **Existential Question** from which we tend to **Escape**. Those categories have provided a way to look beneath the surface and discern some underlying issues and struggles that provide a way of making sense of what's happening and addressing it creatively. With a new decade well under way, it seems time to have another go at that task. But first a quick review.

In the 70s we experienced **expanded horizons**. The oil crisis and the Vietnam War brought globality home to us personally. Our internal experience was **unity**: we sensed a common humanity with people everywhere. Our existential question was "**How can I participate?**" and we often escaped the demand of that question through **withdrawal**, either into ourselves with a self-sufficient style or into the cheap euphoria of drugs. One authentic response to this existential question was the development and promulgation of the Technology of Participation (ToP®).

The 80s were a time when we experienced the **collapse of separating boundaries** and encountered the **inescapable diversity** of planet Earth. Transportation and communication systems brought about shrinkage of space that had kept differing peoples apart. Now we were intimately connected to those who are not like us at all. The existential question it raised was one of **integrity**: "**Where do I stand?**" With all the options so visible and viable (and none of them universal), what standpoint can be the basis of my integrity? We tended to escape through **mindless relativism** ("When in Rome, do as the Romans do"). The authentic response in this decade came in the formation of collaborative efforts and alliances among dramatically different groups.

In the 90s we encountered a time of the **intangibles**: in science, nano-physics disclosed that nothing is substantial in the materialistic sense. Everything is energy in motion. Technology focused on information management, business on vision and values, medicine on preventive practices, cultures on foundational traditions. Our internal crisis was **meaning**. The question raised was: "**What's worthwhile?**" Where is it possible to find the significance that will add fizz and mischief into life? **Spiritualism** was our escape in which we pursued mysticism and various Eastern religions as a New Age search for human

authenticity. Authentic responses came in the disclosure of depth in the midst of ordinary experiences, a transparency sometimes disclosed in photography and art.

In the 00s, the turn of the century was a decade in which we experienced the **collapse of sustaining structures**. It was not simply 9-11 that occasioned our perception of collapse. Economic, political and cultural institutions which had provided a sense of stability and predictability seemed no longer to work effectively. Even the environment showed its fragility. In this situation we encountered a terrifying crisis of **security**. Our underlying question was “**What can I trust?**” We attempted to escape the turmoil of that question through a **belligerence** that seemed prepared to do battle with anyone and anything that called into question dependence on our favorite institutions. Another attempt to escape the question was through establishing security systems, notably at airports in an attempt to thwart the aims of “terrorists.” We also developed regulatory systems for economic institutions. Authentic responses to this situation came in the formulation of new myths. This was the time of Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings in which authors were developing stories that showed heroism in the face of unavoidable insecurity and terrifying danger.

We’ve just turned into a new decade, and hopefully one that can diminish some of the hostility of the past ten years. Certainly Obama’s election seemed to herald a new time, though subsequent events have shown belligerence to have a residual persistence that remains disruptive. Still, there is a new scent in the air that may herald a distinctive decade ahead. I’d like to explore that a bit now.

The 10s seem to be a time of **intensifying technology**. Our dependence on gizmos and gimmicks has never been stronger. While watching young children lined up with their parents to see Santa Clause at a shopping mall, I noticed a couple with two children in the queue both intently fiddling with their smart phones, probably surfing the Web or social networks. Even their two children were playing with toy cell phones. Later driving home I met numerous cars whose drivers were talking into their cell phones. A colleague spoke recently about college students who were unable to take a 4-hour examination because they couldn’t be away from their smart phones that long – they were addicted. Of course it’s not only the cell phones and their remarkable inclusion of apps for unimaginable activities that capture addicts. Computers, automobiles, TV’s, and other technologies that have defined modern life have developed their own dependents. A recent NY Times article describes a local coffee shop as “Laptopistan,” complete with its own

economics, polity, culture, and ethics. Looking at research into energy generation, biotechnology, robotics, and artificial intelligence, technology seems only to be in its infancy (but in a phase of rapid growth). It's no surprise that Time magazine selected the founder of Facebook as their "Person of the Year" for 2010, and that "Social Networks" is a candidate for an academy award.

The function of technology is to expand human potential. Current research and inventions seem to offer undreamed of possibilities. Virtual meetings, satellite radio, microwave meals, robotic surgery, online shopping with digital assistants, self-driving automobiles, self-diagnosing body parts, space travel - even avatar immortality - are all either currently available or in pilot stages. The interior crisis occasioned by all this possibility is **bewildering potential**. We face a paralyzing complexity of possibility. Clearly the old structures are past their usefulness as we saw in the past decade. Now we are bewildered by pure potential for creating a new functioning civilization. Technology is no longer a constraint: we can do even more than we can imagine. Our imaginations, however, seem constrained by established images of systems and structures that no longer work. We don't know how to think in new categories, or even what those categories might be. People often speak of this as a digital generation gap, and to be sure there is one. But I suspect even the brightest young geeks haven't set themselves to thinking of new ways to operate as a global society. Pure potential is an abyss - a gap with no place to stand, no security, and no certainty. That's the situation in which we find ourselves.

Our existential question is "**How can we operate?**" that is, "**How can we be in this world together?**" and even the "we" is not clear. At one time it could refer to the family or our network of friends or colleagues or the community or the state or party or nation or race or even in our more generous moments, humanity as an inclusive whole. Now even that seems inadequate. The environmentalists have expanded our horizons. All flora and fauna now seem to have a claim on us. Even the mineral resources which we've extracted and manipulated with abandon seem to be crying for attention. Neither our economic, political nor cultural systems are equipped to address those cries.

We seem to have developed **three means of escape** from this question. **One is the more political** in which we latch onto any person or group that pretends, not so much to have a solution as to point the blame at someone else. In the USA, the Tea Party is rich in its objections to "the system" but sparse in its alternatives. More radical groups and

movements seek to destroy existing systems in favor of a greatly reduced grouping that is pure in its ideology but exclusive of the diversity that characterizes global society.

The **second approach is more cultural** and can be found in the **media**. Programs like "The Biggest Loser," "Lost," "The Survivor," "Amazing Race," "Apprentice," "Undercover Boss," "Slapdown," and other so-called "reality shows" have captured a huge market in the US and abroad. Their common feature is the depiction of people in terribly difficult circumstances, and their appeal is in presenting the mental, physical, and emotional struggles of protagonists in agonizing detail. We seem to take some comfort in seeing others going through internal upheavals similar to our own. The reason these are escapes is that on television there is always a way out, a winner, or a rescue. At that point their analogy to our experience of reality breaks down.

A **third escape, perhaps in the economic domain, is to become enthralled with the newest technological gimmicks**. New inventions are fascinating and quite capable of captivating our attention. Certainly each new development offers new possibilities, and it takes quite a long time to master them. Anyone who has examined the instructions manual for a new camera or smart phone or computer can recognize the difficulty involved in their operation. Mastering them can take a lifetime - but long before then, newer versions have become available. It is important to be aware of developments, but continually to raise the question of applying them to development of new systems for civilization.

Authentically facing up to the existential question requires us to **build new models**, models that are inclusive in their scope and in their development. We need models for a global economy, for a polity that is inclusive, for a culture that respects diversity. There are pilots in all these arenas, but none has the recognition that might lead to widespread adoption. And the old systems will not go quietly away. There is opposition to be faced. Much is at stake. In the 60s and 70s, the Ecumenical Institute / Institute of Cultural Affairs set out to develop a "New Social Vehicle" based on a "New Religious Mode." We succeeded admirably in formulating the rational and spiritual frameworks for those realities. And we put into place numerous pilot projects demonstrating what the future called for. We even experimented with replication in which those pilots could set in motion a rapid expansion. Those are valuable resources for the task at hand.

After four or five decades, the environment has altered dramatically. Globality is no longer an edge concept; it's an operating reality, thanks in part to technology. Instead of expanding people's

horizons, we now need to enhance the recognition and appreciation of diversity. Learning from the past, we will need collaboration with dissimilar groups, appreciation of depth in ordinary situations, stories and myths that support creativity, and, of course, the technology that is newly at hand.

## **Chapter Five**

# **Mystery and Meaning: Eight Dimensions of Reality**

**(Ontology for the Rest of Us)**



## Introduction

I first named this chapter "Dimensions of Popular Ontology." Soon it became clear that the title was either excessively pretentious or deliberately obscure. I'd like to avoid both of those traps and concentrate the reader on reality. An underlying theme of this work is that the Christian Faith assists one in attaining an authentic relation to reality. In attempting to clarify that thesis, it's appropriate to say what I mean by "reality," and the more or less professional word for that is "ontology."

The real topic of this chapter is what we mean by "reality" and how we can be rightly related to it. My aim is to provide a sense of how we find ourselves dis-related to reality and what a restoration of an authentic relation might entail.

This work has been in progress off and on for 8 years. It still leaves something to be desired, but represents where I currently stand.

One fact worth mentioning: I do not intend to fall into the Pelagian heresy by suggesting that we alone can achieve a right relation to reality. Life is far too complex for that. Still, it's not as if we can do nothing. Despite Luther's injunction to "Sin boldly," one is able to attempt an appropriate relation to reality, however finally futile that effort may turn out to be. And at least we may be able to avoid some of the disruptive relations that play such an active part in the world today.

In any case, this chapter may be seen as an application of the principles in the earlier works.

I have used somewhat irreverent quotations to mark each section, in part to distinguish them and in part to insert a little humor into a rather analytical work that could easily be boring.

# Relating to Reality

## *Executive Summary*

Human authenticity consists of being in a right relationship with reality. In our current view, reality consists of eight interrelated dimensions that seem to occur in closely-related pairs: Space and Socio-culture; Time and Identity; Technology and Energy; Physical Matter and Meaning. Each of these eight dimensions is universal in scope. Each poses its own issues in terms of attaining a right relationship to it. Different dimensions are emphasized at different times, and the present seems to be a time of emphasis on space and socio-culture.

## *Introduction*

Whenever we're wrongly related to reality, we are in a situation of self-destruction. In religious terms, it is a condition of un-faith or sin. Restoring faith means authentically re-connecting with reality. But conceptions of what constitutes reality vary considerably, and change from time to time. What I'd like to do is first, to attempt a quick summation of what constitutes reality in the contemporary mindset, then second, to indicate the issues we have in relating to it, and finally, to indicate ways in which authentic relations can be re-established or at least communicated. The aim of the paper is to provide the basis for addressing the crises of faith that people experience today and offer the possibilities of encountering life as meaningful.

The matter of clarifying what is real, or what reality consists of, is an on-going effort. One of the latest from the point of view of science is super-string theory which posits that the ultimate entity of which everything consists is not a tiny particle (even a point-particle), but rather is vibrating energy strings. It's a fascinating theory well-explained in the book *The Elegant Universe* by Brian Green<sup>53</sup>. In the process of describing this theory, its justifications, and implications, Green indicates that reality has 11 dimensions, not simply the three spatial and one temporal that we are familiar with.

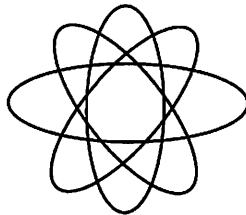
I do not intend to further elaborate on this theory or even attempt to understand it, but rather I'd like to use the notion of multiple

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<sup>53</sup> Brian Green, *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Random House, 2003)

dimensions as a metaphor to communicate the common understanding of reality's components and the way that "spirit problems" consist of unhealthy relations to reality.

I'd like to begin by providing a sort of roadmap of reality, i.e., an indication of the multiple dimensions of reality that we assume in our normal operation. This is sort of a pop-ontology that attempts to get at the assumptions out of which we live. It's an attempt to state the "common sense of science" that is active these days. Once people thought reality consisted of four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Everything else consisted of some combination of the four. That view now seems at best, "pre-scientific." Later, people lived in a "3-story universe" (and that was common sense, not religion, though religion used it to convey its particular insights); today we live in a multi-dimensional universe that must become the mode through which religious insights can be communicated, understood, and embodied.<sup>54</sup>



We're all familiar with the above diagram, representing the relationships of the various components of an atom. I'd like to use it as a graphic portraying the relationships among the various dimensions that compose reality. Each of the "orbits" in the diagram affects all the others, though each has its own integrity. That is an important factor to note in our assumptions about reality.

What might it mean to surmount the current crises and relate authentically to the various dimensions of reality? In the following pages we will describe the eight dimensions of reality and the ways we struggle with them. We will also consider ways of actually making the transformation to authenticity.

One qualification needs to preface this essay: it's highly unlikely that we can, through our own efforts, create a situation of authentic

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<sup>54</sup> After the 3-story universe collapsed, a more "scientific" view was developed in which reality was composed of the basic elements contained in the Periodic Table. Still later atoms and the sub-atomic particles surfaced. The point is that notions of what constitutes reality change. This paper attempts to mark the current milestone in that change process, not for scientists but for the rest of us.

relation to the various dimensions of reality. When those situations occur, it's always an unanticipated gift of grace – a surprise. We do not manufacture our own authentic relations; they are beyond our capacity. Nevertheless, they most often occur when we are engaged in actively seeking them. So what I will describe is the path along which meaningful relation to the dimensions of reality may occur.

Let's begin with the two that are currently "hot" in the sense of critically important: Space and Socio-Cultural.

## I. SPACE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL

### A. 1.SPACE

*"And remember, no matter where you go, there you are."*

– Earl Mac Rauch

The first is space. Though invisible, we all know what it is. It ranges in scope from nano- to astronomical. It is about distance and size, and answers the question "Where?" There is no getting away from space; we're in it (and probably it's in us). Interestingly, spatial distances are sometimes measured in temporal categories – light-years, for example. Quite a lot of Einsteinian science has been devoted to showing the interpenetration of space and time. Yet for practical purposes, they are distinct. Matters of space are examined in such intellectual disciplines as Cartography, Geography, and Astronomy. There is some interest in physics about what constitutes space and whether there is such a thing as empty space<sup>55</sup>, but those matters are somewhat removed from the practical assumptions with which we are concerned.

Ordinarily we assume that space has features of up-down, left-right, and in-out as the primary three grids on which everything can be located. Common instruments with which we deal with space are maps and measures, and the popularity of Google Earth, Map Quest and Global Positioning Systems have lent a new fascination with the whole phenomenon of locating things within a spatial context. Measurement has become a fascination for physicists who have defined the smallest measure of space as a "Planck length" ( $10^{-33}$  centimeters) and the largest distances in billions of light years. Most of us are content with the categories of either the inch-foot-yard-mile system or the millimeter-centimeter-meter-kilometer system, depending on our place of birth. Our

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<sup>55</sup> There is also interest in the possible curvature of space, and its apparent expansion, much as a balloon expands when being inflated.

dominant interest in space, however, seems less in measuring it than in moving through it: transportation is a major activity in all cultures.

We generally manage to tolerate the difficulties space imposes regarding distance. We've learned to communicate across extensive distances and to travel across them and to tolerate the frustrations both entail. We've been so successful in conquering the distance space imposes that we've even created games in which the object is to get across a defined distance through numerous (human) obstacles to a "goal line."

On a more personal level, our spatial surroundings have an impact on our consciousness, subtly producing behaviors that we may not have intended. The space in which we operate sends "messages" to us that may produce relaxation, reflection, anxiety, or motivation. We sometimes encounter spatial chaos in our living or working environments when disorder rears its ugly head. We are somehow compelled to rearrange or to "clean up" or to beautify the space so that we can be comfortable in it. Bringing order into space helps us to function effectively.

A development has occurred in the arena of space with the invention / discovery of cyberspace, a "place" in which things exist that have no physical presence. A great deal of information exists in and "travels through" cyberspace and much of it has no physical existence at all. It is quite unclear "where" that information resides - perhaps in a computer network which itself is difficult to locate. There appears to be a new generation which is not only familiar with cyberspace, but seems to be quite at home there. We of the older generation find ourselves immigrants to that territory and regard those who "live" there as not quite trustworthy. "Second Life" is almost beyond our comprehension.

Certainly it's possible to escape reality through absorption into cyberspace. But it's also possible and frequent to escape reality by paying no attention to the space in which we show up. Getting mentally attuned to the space we actually occupy requires disciplined effort. Our bodies and minds often seem to occupy different spaces. When that happens, we are dis-related to reality.

We're moving into an era in which space is becoming transparent and raising faith-issues. Here's a quick view of what happened:

Space has collapsed - or at least has shrunk - in terms of its ability to separate peoples of different beliefs, experiences, and values. Once, the distance between peoples of substantial difference served to separate us. Traveling across vast expanses of space was daunting, if possible at all. Now we think little of moving around the globe, and our reluctance to

cross the country is more a matter of convenience and price than one of possibility. Distance no longer separates us from peoples who are different. On a daily basis we confront those whose cultures are not only different from ours, but in many ways opposed to it. Living in a world of diversity is no longer an inconvenient option for liberal-minded freethinkers. It's a daily experience of everyone. This contraction of space has occasioned a significant crisis in the socio-culture dimension in which we have to accommodate competing values and life styles with appreciation and respect. It's no longer spatial size and distance that we find problematic: it's now the compactness of space and its closeness that's causing concern.

Space itself has another and quite different issue. Space that for generations was a sort of neutral background factor in our perceptions has suddenly become a topic of urgent concern. It seems that we can no longer assume our macro living space (the Earth) is secure. According to increasingly frequent news reports, it is threatened by global climate change, atmospheric pollution, rising seas, species extinction, meteoric collision, and resource depletion in addition to the usual suspects of ethnic cleansings, rampant diseases, terrorism, and wars. These reports have brought to consciousness the relative fragility of the space we occupy. If that weren't enough, the mortgage crisis has, in forcing many out of their homes, brought the issue of space to consciousness in a very personal manner.<sup>56</sup>

The major spatial crisis today has to do with finding ways to look after it so that we can be sustained. While the contact with diverse peoples persists and indeed increases its intensity, that is more a matter of socio-culture than space, and will be addressed later.

Transformation of space requires art, the deliberate arrangement of shapes and colors that subtly and unconsciously communicates a message of meaning by displaying relationships that are not immediately obvious.

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<sup>56</sup> "Finitude means having no definite place; it means having to lose every place finally....To have no definite and no final space means ultimate insecurity." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1951) p.

## A. 2. TRANSFORMING SPACE

***"It's very hard to take yourself too seriously when you look at the world from outer space."***

– Thomas L. Mattingly II

The issue with space has to do with its fragility: no longer can we trust space to provide us a measure of security. To become rightly related to that reality requires a dual movement. On the one hand we need to be reconciled to the fact of fragility and insecurity: no conceivable efforts will nullify threats to our spatial environment. Global warming may be diminished, nuclear intimidation may be contained, and excess consumption may be controlled, but there are numerous potential disasters, from comets<sup>57</sup> to plagues, which cannot be mitigated<sup>58</sup>. Not only is the space itself fragile in the sense of being vulnerable to destruction, it is also incapable of being possessed. However attached we may be to particular spaces, we cannot "own" them. As Tillich says, "To have no definite and no final space means ultimate insecurity."<sup>59</sup> Once accept the irrefutable fragility of space, then you begin to appreciate its present reality and the "givenness" of the space we currently occupy. Given the threats, it's nothing less than a wonder that space continues to support life at all. It may be this sense of appreciation that is fundamental to achieving an authentic relation to space.

On the other hand we need to care responsibly for the space we occupy. The "green" revolution has developed countless practical methods of reducing our footprints on the environment, from recycling to no-till farming. "Natural Capitalism" has emerged as an approach to commercial environmental responsibility that turns out to be more profitable than most current practices.<sup>60</sup> It is arguable whether or not the various individual practices that environmentalists promote are effective in "saving the earth," but thanks in part to the efforts of Al Gore<sup>61</sup>, increasing numbers of people are making serious efforts to live a style of voluntary simplicity. The important fact here is that people are beginning

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. Gregg Easterbrook *"The Sky is Falling"* The Atlantic, June 2008 pp. 74-84

<sup>58</sup> E.g. volcanoes. Cf. Simon Winchester, *Krakatoa: The Day the World Exploded: August 27, 1883* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003)

<sup>59</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I* op.cit.

<sup>60</sup> P. Hawkins, A. B. Lovins, L. H. Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: The Next Industrial Revolution* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1999)

<sup>61</sup> See Al Gore, *An Inconvenient Truth* (New York: Rodale Books, 2006)

to take responsibility for the space we occupy, and that's a step towards a right relationship with space<sup>62</sup>.

Of course, the ultimate in spatial transformation consists in achieving "sacred space," that is, space which points beyond itself to ultimate mystery. Whereas we cannot guarantee any manipulation of space will have the desired effect, there are some practices that seem to help. A dominant one is the use of art, visual representations that point to or imply a relation to a more inclusive reality. Transformation of space requires art, the deliberate arrangement of shapes and colors that subtly and unconsciously communicates a message of meaning by displaying spatial relationships that are not immediately obvious. Space that we occupy for working, playing, worshipping, and living can be enhanced by the placement of art that adds another dimension to our experience. It enhances our consciousness both of space's fragility and of our appreciation for it. As Leonard Bernstein said, "Any great work of art revives and readapts time and space, and the measure of its success is the extent to which it makes you an inhabitant of that world – the extent to which it invites you in and lets you breathe its strange, special air."

While most of us enjoy periodic visits to sacred space, an authentic relationship to space would involve making sacred whatever space we occupy. Sometimes that happens; often it does not.

## B. 1. SOCIO-CULTURE

*"It is better for civilization to be going down the drain than to be coming up it."*

– Henry Allen

The second dimension of reality is **socio-culture**. This is the dimension that addresses the question of "Why?" and provides language and values to people. The scope of this dimension ranges from the family to the globe and is invariably corporate. It has to do with relationships: what they are and how they operate. Disciplines that explore various aspects of this dimension are Anthropology, Sociology, Politics, Economics, and Culture Studies.

With this dimension we remain in the less visible; values and relationships are universally present, but identified by extrapolating from observable behavior. This dimension, too, is universal. Everyone lives within some socio-cultural context. Though these contexts may differ

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<sup>62</sup>See Thomas Friedman, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need A Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008)



significantly, there is always some evidence of this dimension, and it's the diversity of the contexts that people inhabit that accounts for many of the tensions and conflicts in life. There is a certain amount of choice in this dimension: though we cannot select our biological family, we are able to determine what community we participate in.

In the current emphasis on globality, some would say that our particular network of relationships literally extends to the ends of the earth. That may be true theoretically, but practically our socio-cultural contexts are considerably narrower. They extend outward from family to community and include institutions of education, religion, and style.

The socio-cultural dimension receives a great deal of attention today since spatial borders separating us from those unlike ourselves have largely vanished. We've been forced to encounter people different from ourselves and to realize that our way is not the only or best way. There are those whose dearest values I find contemptible - and they return the favor. Whatever our regard for individuals, large groups have differing values and basic assumptions about reality. Hofstede<sup>63</sup> and Trompenaars<sup>64</sup> are two leading scholars who have identified categories of differences that distinguish various societies, and their insights have been welcomed by the business community in its global expansions.

Our social environment exerts a strong influence on us, whether we choose to accept it or to reject it. But however we react to our own socio-cultural framework, a crisis point comes when we encounter one that is dramatically different. Then we're thrown back to examine our assumptions and values. When that becomes too painful, we adopt either a "When in Rome..." socio-cultural relativism in which anything is acceptable or we hunker down inside our own and defend it fanatically. The current rise of fundamentalism in various religions marks the tendency of people to deny the validity of alternative cultures and values.

It sometimes leads to hostility and violence as we try to get rid of the "other." *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*<sup>65</sup> is a recent book that chronicles the division in America of those of like minds into "closed" communities with a hostile relationship to those with alternative viewpoints. It's an attempt to escape

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<sup>63</sup> See Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2005)

<sup>64</sup> Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, 3rd edition (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2012)

<sup>65</sup> Bill Bishop (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2008)

from diversity. In fact so volatile is the confrontation of cultural differences that some speak of "The Clash of Civilizations" as a major hazard for the future<sup>66</sup>. Of course neither relativism nor fanaticism works in a world that is inescapably pluralistic. We're driven to search for our "place" in the wider world.

One way of transformation is through myth, ritual, and drama in which ultimate origins and relations are portrayed, and the story of our culture is highlighted. The key is to highlight one's own socio-culture while not denying alternatives. On Bali, for example, virtually every night has at least one dance-drama that re-enacts some feature of the local culture in relation to the gods. And Bali survives as a Hindu community in the midst of an intensely Muslim nation.

## B. 2. TRANSFORMING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION

***"Home is less where your heart is than where you understand the sons-of-bitches."***

– Dave Hickey, "The Texas Observer" quoted in Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (New York: Avon Books 1982)

Encountering people from different socio-cultural environments is both inevitable and traumatic, especially when their assumptions and values differ markedly from our own. The trauma derives from our insistence on the old maxim "People are basically the same down underneath." While that adage may have some biological validity, when it comes to assumptions and values, it is certainly not the case. Our first effort when confronted with substantial difference is to search for some common ground on which to build a relationship. Sooner or later that "ground" proves to be shifting sand and we're thrown back up against sheer opposition.

In that situation three responses typically occur: ethical imperialism, ethical relativism, and, hopefully, a transnational approach.<sup>67</sup> Our first response to different values, after finding no common ground, is to attempt first to clarify and then to enforce our own position. "The opposing value must be a misunderstanding since mine is certainly right and universal." When that approach proves counterproductive, our next response is often relativism: "When in Rome,

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<sup>66</sup> See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, Touchstone, 1996)

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Steven L. Wartick & Donna J. Wood, *International Business & Society* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001) pp. 147-152

do as the Romans do." There are both philosophical and practical refutations of that principle, and its sociological consequences are well documented in Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*<sup>68</sup>.

Transforming the socio-cultural dimension means coming to terms with diversity and avoiding the temptation of polarization. It means being willing to live in a pluralistic world without sacrificing your own values. It means developing personal integrity while attempting to understand and appreciate alternative world-views. What Wartick and Wood call "the transnational approach" means consciously and critically developing your own set of standards with input from alternative approaches. It does not mean accommodating opposing values, but it means recognizing that they exist and work for those from different socio-cultural backgrounds. It means developing and steadfastly holding to your values as particular rather than as universal and as chosen rather than as imposed.

I've found two routes to that stance helpful: experience and study. The former includes travel and, if possible, living in a different culture. That travel does not have to be international: North America itself contains a wealth of cultural differences.<sup>69</sup> But it has to get beyond the "tourist" sites and provide access to daily life of locals. And interaction with locals will be very important. Experience, however, just raises the question, often in very personal and sometimes traumatic ways. Experience alone rarely produces the desired understanding and appreciation.

For that you need study. Fortunately numerous books are available to provide a guide to grasping the essences of cultural differences. They highlight distinctive characteristics that differentiate cultures, such as individual-communal, power distance, relationships-rules, status as ascribed vs. achieved, etc.<sup>70</sup> Once you've had the experience, categories that make sense of it are welcome, indeed. They provide enough distance from the experience to allow understanding and appreciation to develop. This does not mean "going native." But it means grasping something of the incredible diversity of civilization as a gift rather than as an aberration.

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<sup>68</sup> Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (New York: Avon Books, 1982)

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Trompenaars, op.cit.

These two "routes" provide the setting in which transformation may occur, but the actual transformation involves mythology. Every set of values has ideological roots, and these are expressed in and communicated by myths. Recovering and activating myths of one's socio-cultural context allows one to appreciate their significance even while acknowledging their non-universality.

Dramas are especially useful in performing this function, and developing countries are often quite adept at using this mode for communicating socio-cultural roots. Villages in India and Bali abound with performances of the Ramayana; American Indians conduct periodic Pow-Wows; during the festival of Thaipusan in Malaysia, local Indians often carry body-piercing weights to dramatize their devotion to the gods; the Thai people publicly enact "Loi Katong" ceremonies in which lighted candles are set afloat on a river. In more developed nations, parades and fireworks displays often mark events of moment, even if the dramatic element is less pronounced. The success of these dramas may be determined by the extent to which they enact and communicate the fundamental values of the culture. Ideally they will portray those values as based in the transcendent realm, and so ascribe to them some degree of ultimacy.

These days media coverage makes many socio-cultural dramas accessible to a wider audience than devotees of those myths. We can participate in the dramas of other cultures, and so become appreciative of their validity, even without adopting them as our own. In fact "going native" in the sense of trying to adopt the myths and culture of others is quite the opposite of attaining an authentic relationship with the diversity in the socio-cultural dimension.

Now let's turn to another complementary pair: Time and Identity.

## II. TIME AND IDENTITY

### C. 1. TIME

*"Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana."* – Groucho Marx

*"Time is that quality of nature which keeps events from happening all at once. Lately it doesn't seem to be working."*

– Anonymous

The third dimension is time. It also has three primary grids: past, present, and future, and answers the question "When?" We are also

inescapably in time, and time is in us in fascinating ways. We ARE only in the present, though, as Augustine noted, the past lives in us as memory and the future as anticipation. And the present in which we live is fleeting - gone instantaneously and transformed into past. It seems to puzzle scientists why the "arrow of time" goes in one direction only (from past to future, not vice versa)<sup>71</sup>. Curiously, the measure of time is inevitably spatial: how far the hands of a clock have moved, or how far the Earth has rotated. In fact so closely are these two dimensions related that Brian Green, voicing the consensus of current physicists, refers to "space-time" as a single dimension. Intellectual disciplines that devote themselves to the study of various aspects of time are History, Archeology, Paleontology, and Futurology. It's debatable whether the latter is a recognized discipline, but numerous respectable academics practice the art or science of making predictions. Pollsters, trends analysts, and futurists all relish the practice of looking ahead in time.

For most of us, however, our concern is the passage of time. The measurement of hours and minutes is a major activity in most cultures. Of course with instant global communications, one wonders what the term "now" actually means. Time once divided us into arenas defined by the journey of the sun, but the "same time" in Denver is 15 hours different from that time in Kuala Lumpur. Still, "telling time" is an activity in all cultures. The other factor about time that concerns us is routine - when repeating the same activity over and over becomes boring. We all look for a certain variety in our expenditure of time and when it is missing, we regard time as defective in some way, as "wasted time."

Time simply moves ahead quite apart from any control we exert. Whether it actually continues always at the same pace or whether it sometimes drags and sometimes flies is probably a matter of our response to what is going on. But the crisis of time comes when we realize that ours is limited: we are moving relentlessly forward towards our death. Then it becomes a matter of considerable urgency to "make the most of our time."

It's also possible (and frequent) to escape reality by paying no attention to the time in which we show up. With our active memories and anticipations and imaginations, getting mentally attuned to the now requires disciplined effort. Much of Buddhist teaching consists of techniques for focusing on the present. Our bodies and minds often seem

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Brian Green, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (New York: Random House, 2004)

to occupy different time periods. When that happens, we are dis-related to reality.

In fact the crisis of time is not so much that our participation in it ends, but that the time we have sometimes seems "empty." It often seems that the knowing or doing with which we fill our time is trivial, insignificant, meaningless. It seems to lack a contribution to anything worthwhile. In those situations we are intensely dissatisfied, looking constantly to find a way to change the situation. We may experience those times as boredom or more dramatically, as occasions of depression or despair. In those moments we look for something interesting to fill our time, some activity that is out of the ordinary. It may be a hobby or an act of charity, but whatever it is, it provides some break from the routine in which we are enmeshed. In the business world, people often speak of needing a "work-life balance;" another and more accurate way to state that is to say people need rhythm in their time to vary the way in which it is expended. Rhythm is a key to managing our time. The medium that communicates a transformation of time is rhythm usually expressed in music, the deliberate arrangement of sounds and rhythm that sends a message of meaning.

These days, time is not what it used to be. While it never has been the all-constricting enclosure transporting us inescapably from past to future (we've always had memory and anticipation and so able to step outside the arrow of time, at least mentally, emotionally, and spiritually), still we've been preoccupied by the fact of our physical degeneration and ultimate demise brought on by time's relentless passage.

While our degeneration has not lessened despite all the remedies hyped on TV, our obsession with time's passage has mutated into an underlying rumination. Maybe we've become enamored by the future - or the past. But I suspect rather than time's fading, what we're experiencing is the intrusion of another different and more urgent preoccupation with Space.

## C. 2. TRANSFORMING TIME

***"Half our life is spent trying to find something to do with the time we have rushed through life trying to save."***

– Will Rogers

The issue with time for us has two parts: on the one hand, our time of living is limited. On the other hand, it often seems "empty." What does it take to achieve an appropriate relationship to time, to appropriate the time we have as meaningful?

Traditionally meaningful time has been described as "chairotic." The term has been used to characterize the sense of time portrayed in the Scriptures. Scriptures are historical documents, but the history they present is time-infused-with-meaning. That is quite different from events recorded by "objective" historians who attempt to present the events accurately without value-laden judgments. Histories of chairotic time have been characterized as myth – not in the sense of falsehood, but in the sense of recording a story that discloses a dimension of meaning.<sup>72</sup> Their concern with "historical accuracy" is secondary.

How do we convert our normal "business as usual" time ("chronos") into meaningful time ("chairos")?

The answer is twofold: 1. We can't; and 2. We don't have to.

Time already has a dimension of meaning; our issue has to do with perceiving the meaning that is already present, not in manufacturing something "foreign" to the moment. Every attempt to impose an alien meaning on time is at best short-lived and at worse, terribly destructive. Let me elaborate.

Meaningful time is purposeful time, that is, it is moving with some long-term direction. But when that direction is defined narrowly, the steps taken towards it disrupt the on-going civilizing process. For example, Hitler's purpose of achieving a master race was exclusively geared towards Aryans. The destruction on the world brought about by following that narrow purpose was massive.

The purpose towards which chairotic time moves is inclusive and profound. It includes the past, the present, and the future – the dead and the unborn and all the living. Our role in it is temporary, a privilege

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth: A Study Based on the Theology of Rudolph Bultmann* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) for a discussion of truth and myth.

we've been granted. Our role is to play a part in a drama that begins and ends in ultimate mystery.

Whereas science may describe the mechanism of our ultimate origins - currently the "big bang" theory is in fashion - scientists rightly leave the "why" question open. Advocates of "Intelligent Design" attempt to jump in and posit a benevolent being as the source of our origins as if that would answer the "how" question. This is a confusion of myth and science.

Attempts to identify the final outcome of the drama, its ultimate result, invariably fall short of the inclusiveness and profundity required. Our perspective is limited, in part by our particular socio-cultural environment.

Our task in discerning the meaningful time we participate in, then, has less to do with naming the ultimate result of history than with identifying our particular role in the drama. It's an issue of vocation. As one put it, it's like holding a lighted roman candle and deciding which way to point it while the shots are emerging. Once we decide our direction, then the contribution of that direction to the drama of history is our meaning. Whatever we do contributes to or detracts from that drama. There is no "time off" from a purposeful life,<sup>73</sup> but there is rest and variety and discontinuity that restores energy and brings rhythm to our engagement.

This approach provides everyone the possibility of meaningful time. It does not restrict authenticity in relation to time to those who select a vocation of service or whose lives are paradigms of virtue. Everyone faces the continual choice of contributing consciously or unconsciously to the drama of history. We DO contribute, and that's the meaning of our time.

#### D. 1. IDENTITY

*"Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You."*

- Dr. Seuss

The fourth dimension of reality is identity. While personal identity is composed of many dimensions, it has integrity in its own right.

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Joseph W. Mathews, "The Church Lecture: A Dynamical Understanding of the People of God" in John L. Epps, general editor, *Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp.83ff.



Its scope ranges from bodily appearance to personality (including emotions and style). This dimension addresses the question of "Who?" and disciplines that address it include Biology and Psychology. Whereas those are sometimes linked with medicine as if they addressed only the physical dimension, in fact their object of concern is life (that certainly has physical aspects as well as socio-cultural, temporal, technological, and spatial aspects). Each living individual (human, animal or vegetable) has identity, so as a dimension, it too is universal.

Martin Buber's work on *I-Thou*<sup>74</sup> emphasizes the unique and profound identity of every one/thing which, in most cases is ignored or made superficial, but which nevertheless resides as an inescapable component of reality. Identity is also one of the invisible dimensions that is surmised from observable characteristics, but is not limited to them. There is also some choice present in this dimension in that people can change their identity, sometimes dramatically, through extensive effort. The current recognition of diversity as an important feature of society is a tribute to identity as an unavoidable dimension of reality.

Regarding identity, "Who am I?" is a perpetual question the pursuit of which yields never-ending levels of consciousness and consciousness of consciousness. Persistent pursuit of this dimension sometimes generates exceptional capabilities such as the capacity to stop ones breath for an extended time or to control pain or to contort oneself into bizarre postures. But the point of this pursuit is not to achieve extraordinary abilities but rather, to recognize and accept the one we are. There seem to be innumerable levels at which self-acceptance poses challenges: the physical in which we have to come to terms with our body; the mental in which we have to deal with our limited intelligence; the emotional in which we have to manage our (in)sensitivity; and the spiritual in which we have to address our personal level of depth. In each case, the reality poses us with a built-in tension that on the one hand attracts us and on the other hand repels us.

But the self-acceptance to which I refer is not the same as the pop-psychology "I'm OK, You're OK" trivia. By any objective standards of measurement, you're NOT OK, and neither am I! The popular mantra has no doubt generated some good relations: illusions occasionally yield a positive result. The self-acceptance to which I refer is different. It is NOT satisfaction, but the affirmation of perpetual dissatisfaction. It is NOT

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<sup>74</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (second edition) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958)

complacency, but the affirmation of continual striving. It is NOT peace, but affirmation of perpetual conflict. It is NOT security but affirmation of endless insecurity; NOT success but affirmation of perpetual search for elusive goals; NOT comfort, but affirmation of endless discomfort. The self-acceptance to which I refer means adopting a positive relationship to life's endless driven-ness into tension-filled situations. No wonder it's elusive!

Acceptance is the quest in this dimension. Its absence shows up in various destructive behaviors and may be occasioned by lofty ideals that go beyond our capacities. There seems to be an ongoing quest to "improve ourselves" as if our identity is somehow deficient and needs to be filled out. Programs of physical, cosmetic, psychological, economic, and intellectual improvements to our identity abound, and their proponents are quick to witness to the improvements they have made in their identity. An underlying ideology seems to be that one must undergo "improvements" throughout life, that without constant upgrading, one's identity goes stale.

While honoring the benefits of these self-improvement efforts, I wonder what it would mean to undertake them from the point of view of strength rather than weakness. They tend to be driven by a lack of self-acceptance. But being accepted finally has nothing to do with appearance, knowledge, health, wealth, or intelligence. One might still undertake these programs even if relying on one's acceptance; in fact that might provide a stronger starting point for the exercises.

The difficulty in this dimension also involves recognition of the profound uniqueness of each identity: the "I"-ness and the "Thou"-ness of each one. As H. Richard Niebuhr put it, "'I' and 'Thou' are doubtless always foreigners in the world of things. But it seems to us that they are ignored, passed by, treated as unwelcome intruders more in our twentieth century than has been the case in most other times in human history."<sup>75</sup>

Of course the most obvious crisis in this dimension, and the one we have most immediate dis-relation to, is death, the apparent end of our identity. However much we may improve ourselves, and recognize the profound uniqueness of each individual entity, still there is a terminus to the active agent in the situation. Our awareness of approaching death generates a number of possible responses, many of which exhibit a dis-

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<sup>75</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Address on Martin Buber's Eightieth Birthday" ed. William Stacy Johnson, *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, And Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) p. 135

relation to that reality; we deny it, we fear it, we generate ways to make it simply a transition to another mode of life, we dress it up to appear not to have happened - our creativity has been profound in accommodating death.

The medium through which this crisis is addressed is often religion, reliance on the ultimate source of being for significance. "God loves you" or its equivalent becomes an identity-affirming mantra that allows one to persist despite one's continued brokenness. It becomes perverted when an added touch "...better than the other guys" implies a divine favoritism that promotes arrogance. An ongoing struggle in religions of the world has to do with maintaining a balance between self-depreciation and arrogance while promoting acceptance of the unique identities that constitute being.

## D. 2. TRANSFORMING IDENTITY

*"Maybe the unexamined life is not worth living - but is the examined life one worth loving?"*

- John Epps

As the crisis in the socio-cultural dimension has been heightened by alterations in our sense of space, so also the crisis in identity has been occasioned by our awareness of time. As has been said many times, it's not really until we become aware of our approaching death (the limits of our time) that we raise the question of identity seriously.

But the question of identity is less one of longevity than one of acceptance. The question "Who am I?" may express less a question of uncertainty over identity than uncertainty over whether or not this one I am is worthy of acceptance in the scheme of things. Since it is abundantly clear that "I" do not meet my own quality standards in the realms of beauty, health, morality, intelligence, strength, judgment, humor, sociality, talent, etc. etc. etc., then how could "I" possibly find acceptance in a competitive world? "I" constantly assess others by those standards and find them wanting, and when "I" look in the mirror, the same judgments apply to "me." It's not that "I" don't know who "I" am but rather that "I" know all too well. And since "I" find myself unacceptable, "I" also find that to be the case with others. That makes it particularly difficult to establish and maintain "I-Thou" relations.

How does one get beyond this conundrum to a state in which the search for acceptance of oneself is not one's consuming activity?

First one has to acknowledge that this issue is particularly intense in Western cultures where individualism rather than communalism is the mode of operating. In the East, people are less concerned with themselves as individuals than as participants in a wider group (family or community or nation or race). The way to achieve acceptance is to measure up to the group standards and avoid causing a loss of face. One need not stand out to be accepted. In fact standing out is less important than fitting in.

Back to the West and our individualism, we could definitely do with a substantial dose of community. In fact many forms of individual therapy include group work. One knows oneself best through the eyes of another. In groups it sometimes happens that one experiences acceptance in a transformative way. When that occurs, it is first experienced as an unwelcome intrusion of reality. Our common way of protecting ourselves from our own unacceptability is to create and sustain a web of illusions about reality and about ourselves. When those illusions are punctured and we see a clear view of reality and ourselves, it comes as a very personal crisis. We lash out at the occasion of our view and we try desperately to patch up our illusions. It doesn't work and we approach despair. But then sometimes one experiences in those moments an acceptance - that one is accepted in spite of oneself (not because of one's virtues or talents or contributions, etc.). Then it's as if "I" suddenly become free to pay attention to others<sup>76</sup>. The vicious cycle of self-rejection - rejection of others - rejection of self - etc. becomes broken and a virtuous cycle takes its place wherein my experience of acceptance leads to acceptance of others which leads back to acceptance of me which...

Attaining this experience of acceptance is not limited to times of group therapy or interaction. As Tillich says, "Sometimes it happens"<sup>77</sup> and other times it does not. It seems to be a matter over which we have no control.

Now let's move to a third couple of the dimensions of ontology: technology and energy.

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<sup>76</sup> Cf. Joseph W. Mathews, "The Christ of History" and "The Christ Lecture" in John L. Epps, general editor, *Bending History: Talks of Joseph Wesley Mathews* (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005) pp. 43-53, 55-64

<sup>77</sup> Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted" Chapter 19 of *Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955)

### III. TECHNOLOGY AND ENERGY

#### E. 1. TECHNOLOGY

*"For a list of all the ways technology has failed to improve the quality of life, please press three."*

– Alice Kahn

We have now examined two pairs of dimensions that seem related, and now we move to the third: Technology and Energy. Technology is driven by energy, and the current crisis in finding sustainable energy resources is finding its answers by using technology. The energy shortage renders some technology obsolete, and the lack of appropriate technology renders some energy resources inaccessible. The two are intimately related.

Technology provides the answer to the question "How?" and it has usually not been included in the ontological descriptions of reality. It is often assumed to be a subset of something else. But it has been part of reality since primordial times when basic tools were invented. Not only people, but some animals also engage in the practice of using tools. Technology affects virtually every dimension of our life. Two disciplines that explore and shape this dimension are electronics and engineering. Clearly everyone in developed societies uses various technologies from automobiles to I-Pads. But so also do people in undeveloped societies: tools, however primitive, form an integral part of our operating context. Technology manipulates the physical environment to enhance human capabilities.

More importantly, technology becomes part of our mindset so that we assume possibilities that would have been unimaginable prior to its development. Its impact on space and time are significant: distance has been bridged by communication and transportation technologies. And time is compressed by the possibility of interacting simultaneously in multiple contexts. Computers obviously form a major feature of the modern technological framework, but are not the sole or possibly not the most important. The whole range of electrical technologies has become an integral part of life. Today technology has become an aspect of the environment that, like space and time, is unavoidable

Its fragility frequently causes crises. If you've ever experienced a computer crash or an electric outage or an auto theft, you will recognize the sense of helplessness that quickly emerges. Our dependence on technology becomes manifest, and we are shocked at our own weakness.

We quickly turn to "experts" who can "fix it" and restore our capacities that have been cut off.

But the dis-relation to this dimension is not our dependence on technology; it's our unwillingness or inability to "keep up" with the innovations that are continually occurring. Rather than seeing them as increasing our potential, we find them frustrating, time-consuming, complicated, and still unreliable. We'd rather be satisfied with a familiar product that functions in a predictable fashion and produces acceptable results. New technology has the function of expanding horizons of human potential, and that's not usually a welcome process. Change is the operative mode in this dimension, and no one likes change but a wet baby.

New technology requires new skills and, more important, new imagining of un-dreamed-of possibilities. It drops an element of chaos into society and often occasions a substantial re-organization. The development of the airplane, for example, occasioned a massive re-organization of the transportation industry spinning off multiple service industries and re-arrangement of spaces to provide for airports and restructuring of time to make use of the new options for travel. Regulatory and enforcement agencies and policies had to be developed, and the list could go on.

So what is the medium that restores our relation to the ever-changing dimension of technology? What allows us to BE our dependence on these temporal and changing "machines" that are so unworthy of that dependence? It would need to be something that highlights some features of technology that can be celebrated. Formula One auto racing, for example, highlights the cutting-edge technologies of ground transportation, and the infinitesimally fine tuning required to make the cars perform well. A race constitutes a ritual filled with ceremonies, vestments, processions, and adoring masses intent on absorbing the benefits that are on display.

Perhaps the various fields of technology each have their own festivals highlighting and promoting the innovations achieved. Certainly the computer industry has such events, and one need not look too far to find similar events for most industries. The point of these events is to highlight changes in the industry and new possibilities now able to be realized. They are celebrations of change.

## E. 2. TRANSFORMING TECHNOLOGY

***"My definition of an expert in any field is a person who knows enough about what's really going on to be scared."***

*-- P. J. Plauger*

We have identified the function of technology as the expansion of human potential in dealing with the physical realm, and its crisis as our limited imagination and willingness to adapt to new possibilities. To elaborate:

There are two issues we have with technology:

1. It never works quite as expected, and then it wears out. It promises labor-saving and yet requires much labor to make it work.

2. It challenges our assumptions about what is and is not possible. In generating new possibilities, it violates our world-view and requires major change. The first response to new technology is "paving the cow paths" when completely new ways of travel are possible.

**Authentic relation to technology involves accepting both its finitude and its potential.** That involves jumping in to the new forms (e.g., second life, twitter, smart phones, HDTV, blue-ray, hybrid autos, etc., etc.) while at the same time maintaining some nonchalance over their potential. **It also involves exploring new potentials** opened up by the new technology.

Achieving an authentic relation to technology involves five phases:

1. **Skepticism.** "This can't really work. I've got to see it to believe it." (Ex: seeing a demo of a fax machine operate before considering purchase of one.)

2. **Fascination.** "I want to try it." (Ex: getting a Palm Pilot - that we've never used!)

3. **Dependence.** "I can't operate without it." (Ex: communicating by email.)

4. **Disillusion.** "The damn thing doesn't work correctly!" (Ex: Eudora deleting past emails I thought were filed.) OR "This is too much trouble." (Ex. Digital camera - it works fine but requires substantial effort to re-charge, download, delete, carry, etc.)

5. **Creative Acceptance.** "Let's see what else we can do with this." (Ex: amending ToP® procedures to work with virtual meeting software.)

A social ritual for recognizing new technology comes in the form of festivals. A Grand Prix auto race is a dramatic festival for recognizing new automobile technology. The famous Apple Computer festival introduces new computer technology (as do many other computer fests).

## F. 1. ENERGY

***"I merely took the energy it takes to pout and wrote some blues."***

*– Duke Ellington*

The sixth dimension of reality is **energy**. This term refers to the animating force(s) that generate movement: without it reality would be a static, immobile entity. There are many types of energy, from electrical to motivational, but in every case energy is the reality that occasions motion – or in some cases prevents it, as in friction or inertia or magnetism. Energies generally exist in "fields" of influence so that their impact is spatially defined. The various sources of energy are subjects of fascination to scientists who continue to probe the nature of gravitational attraction, the subatomic strong force and weak force, the ways of producing electricity, and alternative means of producing energy beyond burning refined fossils. Since energy appears in numerous forms, there seems to be no singular discipline devoted to it. But ergonomics addresses it as does physical science (sports), electrical engineering, petroleum sciences, and psychology. One suspects that a new science devoted to the study of energy itself may someday arise, given the presence of movement and therefore energy throughout reality. But that day has not yet arrived.

The crisis regarding energy has to do with its depletion. On the personal level, as we age our level of energy declines. But perhaps more important is the increasing use of energy to power an increasing number and variety of technological instruments (including transportation and communications tools). According to projections, this increase is unsustainable<sup>78</sup>. The current sources of our supply of energy are running out, and new sources are not yet developed. There seem to be numerous potential sources of energy (sun, waves, wind, nuclear, etc.), but converting those into usable sources to support our habits has not yet been accomplished. We face a situation of decreasing supplies.

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<sup>78</sup> For a good exploration of this topic, see Thomas L. Friedman, ***Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America*** (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008).



## F. 2. TRANSFORMING ENERGY

***"The release of atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one."***

*-- Albert Einstein*

The crisis of energy has to do with its depletion. When in its authentic role, it is constructively used. But using energy constructively without depleting the supply seems to be a pervasive issue. According to Thomas Friedman, the answer is not simple, and simplistic answers only exacerbate the issue<sup>79</sup>. Clearly the sun provides ample energy to supply all we need, but harnessing it is an expensive and energy-using technology. Not only is the supply of efficient energy-producing fuels diminishing, the energy produced is distributed in a terribly unbalanced fashion. The West is a massive consumer of energy resources, while the South has access to miniscule amounts in comparison. But to distribute energy world-wide at the level of the West would require the resources of several additional planets.

*"Energy is not only the key driver of the industrial revolution; it is also the best indicator of human development. More importantly, energy has been used as a substitute for other scarce resources. Given that because of climate change, modern energy services have themselves become problematic, it is critical that the transition to renewable energy be undertaken through a cooperative global programme of investment and technological diffusion."<sup>80</sup>*

A systemic response to energy depletion is necessary, and that requires more than good will. We tend to look to technology for a suitable response to energy depletion, but encounter the paradox that technology to develop new energy itself requires energy to operate. The net gain of the transaction is dubious; for example, the production of ethanol to lessen the use of petroleum is said to use more energy than it produces. Furthermore, increased use of energy tends to produce more CO<sub>2</sub> and therefore to enhance global climate change.

The **first law of thermodynamics**, an expression of the principle of conservation of energy, states that energy can be transformed (changed from one form to another), but cannot be created or destroyed.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. Friedman, *op cit.* pp. 203-217.

<sup>80</sup> Tariq Bauri & David LeBlanc, ***"Is Green Growth Really Possible?"***  
<Prosperitywithoutgrowth.UN.debate.pdf>

<sup>81</sup> Wikipedia

Apparently physical matter and energy are convertible, and, as the atomic bomb demonstrated, an enormous amount of energy can be released by conversion of a relatively minor amount of physical matter (though matter of a very specialized sort). But the use of atomic energy is fraught with dangers, both physical and political, and its potential for addressing the depletion of energy has not yet been realized. As the above quote from the United Nations discussion states, the requirement for realizing that potential will require enormous amounts of cooperation and investment. Perhaps the energy crisis is driving us to a state of global collaboration for survival, the first stage of which will be to recognize the issue as real and pressing.

Jeremy Rifkin highlights this possibility in *The Third Industrial Revolution*<sup>82</sup>. His thesis is that we have moved beyond the oil-based energy generation to sustainable energy production on a local basis. This in principle can be ramped up and shared so that organizations can be more locally based.

Now for some comments about our final pair of ontological dimensions: Physical Matter and Meaning.

## IV. PHYSICAL MATTER AND MEANING

### G. 1. PHYSICAL MATTER

*"Inanimate objects are classified scientifically into three major categories: those that don't work, those that break down, and those that get lost."*

—Russell Baker

The seventh dimension of reality that we assume in ordinary existence is **physical matter**. This dimension answers the question "What?" and is the object of sense perception. We do not hear, see, feel, smell, or taste time and space. Our senses are aimed at the physical dimension of reality. The range of "objects" that constitute the physical dimension is vast. Micro sciences probe into the subatomic realities while physics, chemistry, geology, medicine and other sciences probe into the features of more recognizable objects. Perhaps the most significant distinction within the physical dimension is animate / inanimate. Some physical phenomena have the characteristic of life while others do not.

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<sup>82</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is Transforming Energy, The Economy, and the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Why this is so and what constitutes this characteristic are the subjects of on-going deliberations that need not concern us here.

Just as we are bound in space and time, so also are we caught up in the physical dimension. While this seems arguable to some, we do not exist outside the physical dimension. Our thoughts and feelings may be dissociated from our particular physical environment, but the body in which those thoughts and feelings reside is necessarily composed of and enmeshed in the physical dimension. Not only are we composed of physical matter, also all our interactions, guided by our sense perceptions, are with other physical beings, whether they be animate or inanimate. Somehow the physical dimension has received "bad press" in that it is widely seen as inferior, a lower order than mental or moral pursuits. People caught up in physical matters seem to have their priorities out of order. Yet the physical dimension has distinctive attractions that beckon our attention and call for our commitment.

In the physical dimension, quantity and to a lesser extent quality, are sought-after characteristics. We're driven to possess increasing amounts of physical stuff and things, and commerce has learned not simply to meet our physical needs but also to create "needs" for superfluous things that we find ways to acquire. Materialism has always been a drive for mankind, but these days it seems to have reached a new level. We once spent 45 minutes searching a store for a suitable toothbrush holder. An entire floor of the store was filled with alternative versions, each vying for attention. In capitalist societies, people work to produce things and are paid so that they can purchase them. The rationale seems to be to keep pay as low as possible (to keep expenses down) and to keep prices as high as possible (to keep profits up). But from the buyer's point of view, the values are exactly opposite. Such is the ongoing tension in the economic sector.

It is only disruptive when we begin to assess our worth by the quantity and quality of physical resources we possess. And when we exercise our worship in shopping malls<sup>83</sup> - the temples of the physical - we genuinely distort the function of this dimension and accord it a

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<sup>83</sup> It's no exaggeration to say that in malls we practice confession, praise, and dedication. Who has not passed a display and become aware of our personal inadequacy? Or found some object that we regard as wonderfully extraordinary? Or made a resolution to acquire THAT particular item, however long it takes? There is an extensive and pervasive material religion present in society today, and throngs worship at its temples daily.

significating role which it is singularly unfit to play. Physical things (including bodies) do not provide the lasting meaning and purpose for which we long. They may, for a while, produce a sense of satisfaction and gratification; but then new things appear, what we have seems obsolete, someone else has something better or newer or prettier and we're thrown back into the quest. A substantial industry in repair has developed to attempt to manage breakdowns in physical things.

We obviously require physical things for existence, though we probably require far fewer than we consume. And this is becoming an increasingly large issue related to ecological depletion<sup>84</sup>. Investing our sense of worth in the physical dimension, particularly in controlling it, guarantees unending frustration. Physical things invariably break down, wear out, or become obsolete - often by design. Antiques, while surviving over long periods of time, make the point: their uniqueness is proof of the temporal (read temporary) character of all things physical.

But the factor that has recently surfaced regarding the physical dimension is its limited quantity. There is simply not enough for us to survive at the current rate of consumption. The ecology movement has taken this awareness to heart and pointed out the multiple impacts of current practices. Apparently the limited nature of the physical is making itself known and influential. The medium that addresses the passing-ness of all things physical is architecture, and I use that term broadly to include sculpture and fashion. This medium aims at bringing to light beauty and meaning from the tangible features of the environment.

## G. 2.TRANSFORMING PHYSICAL MATTER

*"Life is spontaneous and it is unpredictable, it is magical. I think that we have struggled so hard with the tangible that we have forgotten the intangible."*

-Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider

Physical matter is necessary for life, but its distribution among the living is terribly unbalanced. "Developed" societies possess and consume a disproportionate amount of the world's physical resources. While some imbalance may have always been the case, it has currently reached un-

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<sup>84</sup> Excess consumption may support growth in the economy, but the degree of profligacy apparent in "modern" culture is destructive in many ways carefully catalogued by Andrew Bachevich in *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008).

sustainable proportions. It has been said that if the entire population were to consume at the rate of Western society, it would require the resources of seven planets to support<sup>85</sup>. Clearly some measures of mitigation are necessary.

Anti-poverty movements have been underway for decades by both government and non-profit groups, and the improvements made have been substantial, if incidental. Current hopes that private sector intervention may contribute substantially to the cause offer some optimism to a grim situation. But the private sector is attempting to expand its markets, and should not be tasked with so universal an undertaking, though its contribution can and may be substantial.

But poverty relief is only one part of the solution. The other has to do with us who over-consume the world's physical resources. Currently the "Green" movement moves in this direction, as does the movement towards moderation.

The current plight of the unemployed provides an example. Many people in the USA are out of work, and in despair as the prospects of jobs seem remote. And, since our culture has defined selfhood in materialistic terms, the prospect of being unable to achieve (or sustain) a desirable materialistic lifestyle seems to threaten one's worth as a human being.

That need not be the case. Being unemployed is different from being unengaged, and it's the latter that is a threat to one's dignity. As many retired persons can attest, being "out of work" can be a very busy and personally rewarding time. So long as our definitions of human authenticity revolve around the capacity to acquire material benefits, then the unemployment crisis is serious indeed. But if we were to devise other standards, like contributing to society, then perhaps the situation would be less urgent. Of course for this to happen, a means of providing basic living standards would have to be developed.

Obviously making this change is no simple matter - but it may well be an urgent one.

What if we developed a system in which youth filled all the necessary jobs for society - enough to provide for economic growth of the nation and to sustain a secure position in the global competitive environment. And what if much of the income from those jobs went into a fund from which comfortable sustenance were provided to everyone (including the workers). And what if, at the age of 40 (perhaps with a few

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<sup>85</sup> Talk made at the conference of the International Association of Facilitators in Oxford, UK in October, 2009.

exceptions to ensure expertise and values were transferred to the next generation) people left the “workforce” and entered into the “service force” that undertook projects for social betterment - things like infrastructure maintenance, neighborhood watch, child care, the arts, and other projects often left to the NGO industry. The sense of worth might well be sustained, perhaps better than through competing with a colleague for a higher bonus! There are numerous roadblocks to this sort of system, not the least of which are the failed attempts to achieve some more equitable distribution of goods in the past. This is not about equity: it’s about engagement in worthwhile work.

Of course this would depend on a massive cultural de-valuation of material wealth. But so long as personal aspirations lean towards acquisition of more and more of less and less necessary material goods, then the plight of unemployment will continue to be devastating.

The basic issue, then, has to do with our final dimension, Meaning.

## H. 1. MEANING

*“How is it possible to find meaning in a finite world, given my waist and shirt size?”*

— Woody Allen

The eighth dimension of reality is meaning. This is the least recognized of the lot because it appears only in relationship to the other seven, transforming each of them into an arena of significance. This is the arena that addresses the question of “So what?” and has to do with quality, not substance. Sometimes referred to as the dimension of Spirit, I’ve avoided that word because of its supernatural associations. Disciplines that address this dimension are Ethics, Philosophy and Theology. If space, time, energy, identity and socio-cultural are invisible dimensions, then meaning is doubly so: one does not experience it save in relation to the other dimensions. And what one experiences is the quality of those other dimensions. While there are many “spiritual exercises” designed to isolate this dimension and experience it directly, they invariably fall short since meaning is about adjectives, not nouns. Obviously every dimension of reality has an attribute of quality, so meaning is universal.

The language of this dimension is ascriptive, not descriptive; when using language of meaning, one is ascribing qualities to reality, not describing its physical characteristics. The whole argument between science and religion basically misunderstands this distinction. Meaning is

always determined in relation to a larger context of the reality under consideration. Taken to its maximum, this is the dimension of reality that indicates that particular reality's ultimate relationship, its connection to Ultimate Mystery. When regarded in this relationship, other dimensions undergo transformation: an aura of mystery pervades them, providing a unique significance that might not appear in lesser relationships. Most often meaning appears in ordinary life as a quest. The search for meaning is a well-known theme, and those who seem to have "found meaning" are regarded as extraordinary, indeed.

The crisis of meaning today shows up most clearly in regard to work: people generally find their work to be "meaningless." This is a source of considerable frustration and longing for a more "meaningful" position or task or responsibility. When the level of meaning of a position is not recognized, then those in that position lack motivation and commitment. If my work does not make a difference, why should I care how well it gets done?

When meaning attaches to each of the preceding seven dimensions of reality, a transformation occurs. In the following paragraphs I'll try to sketch out what some of those transformations look like.

When meaning attaches to space - when we find or create meaningful space - it affects us powerfully. There is an Islamic museum in Kuala Lumpur that is impossible to enter without experiencing awe. The arrangement of natural lighting and water and stone combine to create a deeply personal impact on visitors. Visits to places known as sacred spaces seem all to have a similar affect. There seems to be a combination of things that generate the impact, but art is certainly one of them. If sacred sites are paradigms of the possible, what would it take to invest every space we occupy with something of that quality? I think one would have to find a way to highlight the larger relationship of that space - to the community, the nation, the earth, the cosmos, the ultimate. When a bit of space is experienced in its wider relationship, then meaning breaks through.

When meaning attaches to time - when we experience meaningful time - then it shows up in all three dimensions. The past is seen as significant; the present is enacted with artistry; and the future is aimed at a definite purpose. There is also variety in the activities. Whatever you're doing is done with intensity and focus. It's rather like playing in an orchestra: you have a small part in something important that is being created. Subjectively, time seems to pass quickly and you're intensely

alert to all the nuances that are taking place in the surroundings. Tradition has identified time of this sort as "chairois," as opposed to "chronos" which amounts to "business as usual."

When meaning is attached to **physical matter**, then a curious paradox occurs: you become aware of the utter delicacy of the object(s) at hand (both in terms of its fragility and of its temporality) and at the same time, of its importance in a greater scheme of things. Your attitude towards it is one of appreciative detachment. You can easily do without it, yet its presence brings joy. This attitude was cultivated actively in the monastic discipline of poverty. Poverty in this sense has nothing to do with amount of money one possesses. It has to do with one's relation to all of one's possessions. That relation is one of active detachment alongside great appreciation.

When meaning attaches to **technology**, one begins to imagine new possibilities. Learning to operate it, while essential, is secondary to visualizing the accomplishments that now are available<sup>86</sup>. The temptation is to use the new technology for doing better what we now do already; the challenge is to do something different that has not been previously possible. In the business sector, this approach has recently been termed a "blue ocean strategy," that is, creating a new market rather than competing in an old one<sup>87</sup>. The team from Apple Computers that invented and marketed the Macintosh saw themselves not as clever machine-makers, but as changing the way people used computers.

When meaning attaches to the **socio-cultural**, then mythology surfaces. The story and drama of the community becomes widely known and re-enacted. In Cherokee, North Carolina, the tribal people regularly enact the drama of their community's life in a play entitled "Unto These Hills." It powerfully re-enacts the hardships and struggles of the tribe. In addition to attracting tourists and their money, the play also communicates to community members the values and practices that define them. While that and many community dramas are directed towards the past, finding a way to dramatize the future may be an important addition to meaning for a socio-cultural unit.

When meaning attaches to **identity**, you get something like the paradox of the physical: both the temporality and the value of the one is

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. Rolf Jensen, ***The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift From Information to Imagination will Transform your Business*** (New York: McGraw-Hill 1999)

<sup>87</sup> W. Chan Kim & Renee Mauborgne, ***Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Market Space and Make the Competition Irrelevant*** (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005)



acknowledged and affirmed. That value is not attached to longevity but to relationship with the ultimate mystery of being. Seen in that light, it is utterly dispensable, but also infinitely valuable. Jim Collins has described this posture in presenting what he calls "level five leadership." Leaders of this quality have two contrasting characteristics: personal humility and fierce resolve<sup>88</sup>. Once you find yourself accepted, you're very clear about your defects, but have a purpose to which you're devoted. One weakness of many attempts to address the identity malaise is ignoring the purpose and concentrating exclusively on the acceptance. But that addresses only half the issue of meaning.

When meaning attaches to **energy**, you get a focus on constructive use. This often happens as an after effect of war. Weapons and medications developed for use in destructive situations provide breakthroughs for creative employment in civilian situations. The transformation of nuclear power from bombs to sources of electricity brought meaning to the massive production of energy from fission and fusion. But the current issue with our relation to energy is that we squander it. Using petroleum resources to power gas-guzzling Hummers does not appropriately honor the scarcity we've come to know. Meaning in this arena is still being actively sought.

So meaning brings a particular quality to each of the elements of reality.

Meaning itself (the worth-while-ness of something) has three primary approaches: significance (relative to the past), professionalism or artistry (relative to the present) and purpose (relative to the future). Each of these approaches can be applied to the seven dimensions of reality, but the search for meaning is a journey of considerable complexity not to be pursued naively. There are three phases, regardless of the path one undertakes: 1) the phase of enthusiasm, 2) the phase of disillusionment, and 3) the phase of perseverance<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) pp. 17-40

<sup>89</sup> See my *"The Journey of Meaning at Work"* in *The Facilitator: Journal of the International Association of Facilitators*, Spring 2003.

## H. 2. TRANSFORMING MEANING

*"This is our purpose: to make as meaningful as possible this life that has been bestowed upon us..."*

- Oswald Spengler

"Meaning," as the word is being used here, has to do with the worth-while-ness of something. As mentioned above, it only appears in relation to some other facet of reality, and its realization is a journey of considerable complexity. It does not happen all at once.

In a sense, the phrase "transforming meaning" makes little sense, since meaning is that which transforms everything else. The better phrase would be "making meaning a part of one's life." Since meaning is a relational category expressed in ascriptive terms, the question is more like, "In relation to what do all other relations achieve a quality of meaning?"

The only possible answer is "the Whole," "The Mystery," "Being-Itself," "God," "Inclusive Reality." In relation to that, everything else becomes demonstrably finite, flawed, and unworthy of ultimate affection. At the same time, paradoxically, just because of its relation as part of the Whole, it becomes a valuable part of creation worthy of honor. It's the paradox of radical monotheism well defined by H. Richard Niebuhr in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.<sup>90</sup>

That relationship is universal and omnipresent. So the question becomes, "How do we access it?" More precisely, the question is, "How do we become conscious of our relationship to the Ultimate that is always already present?"

"It is the state in which you become aware of the mystery in the over-against-ness. Jesus was aware of the storm and the sun and sunrise and rain, in his brothers and sisters and all creatures, of the presence of a strange mystery that he referred to as FATHER."<sup>91</sup>

That is the perception that discloses meaning present in reality.

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<sup>90</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960)

<sup>91</sup> Joseph W. Mathews, "Contemplation," *Golden Pathways CD* (Chicago: Institute of Cultural Affairs, 1996)

## Conclusion:

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.*

— William Shakespeare (1564 - 1616), *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene i

It should be clear from the foregoing that none of us is in a fully right relationship to the reality we so tenaciously inhabit. One would not need to be judgmental to make that observation – only realistic. But the purpose of the essay is not to condemn, nor to set impossible standards. The purpose is to rise above moralism in our assessments of ourselves and each other, and to take account of the real situation all of us face.

Hopefully it will also be clear that occasionally we do experience glimmers of a right relationship, and that those moments of authenticity serve as witnesses to the meaning that is always everywhere available to us all. Or, as a noted theologian once put it, “All that is, is good<sup>92</sup>.”

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<sup>92</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, op.cit.

# About the Author

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John served ICA as Director of Research in Chicago then in Kuala Lumpur and Denver. He has conducted seminars and consultations on an in-house basis for more than 300 organizations throughout Southeast Asia, the U.S.A., and Europe. Clients include companies in banking, insurance, manufacturing, high tech, and petroleum industries and organizations in the education and not-for-profit sectors.

He is a founding member of the International Association of Facilitators. He is also an adjunct professor in the graduate school of University of Maryland University College.

Dr. Epps received his BA degree from The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, and his PhD from Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

He is married to Ann Stanley and they have no children – yet!

Publications include:

**Bending History: Selected Talks of Joseph W. Mathews** ed. John L. Epps (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2005).

**Bending History: Selected Talks of Joseph W. Mathews, Vol. II** ed. John L. Epps (Tampa: Resurgence Publishing, 2011)

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- "Maps for the Future" in EDGES: New Planetary Patterns, Toronto, July 1991**
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## About William A Holmes

William A. Holmes is Minister *Emeritus* of United Methodism's National Church in Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Memorial. After 24 years as the Church's Senior Minister, he retired in 1998. In addition, Holmes experience includes work as an author, lecturer, and television host. His Most recent publications include:

*The God Mask: A journey into risk, danger and an extraordinary discovery*; Resurgence Publishing Corporation, © 2012

*Mature Christianity: For come-of-age Christians in a come-of-age world*; Resurgence Publishing Corporation, © 2010

Previous writing include, *Tomorrow's Church, A Cosmopolitan Community*, Abingdon Press, 1968, *Careers for Clergy*, Chapter I, "The Pastor," Consortium Press, 1976; and *Nonviolence: Origins and Outcomes*, Chapter VIII, 2003. He has had articles in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* and *The Progressive Christian*, and sermons published in *A Man Named John F. Kennedy*, Paulist Press; 1964, "The Christian Century;" and *Sermons On Suicide*, Westminster Press, 1989. He was also the host for the weekly television program, "Perspective," on WDVM, CBS, Washington, D.C.

Excerpts from his 1963 sermon on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, preached at Dallas' Northaven United Methodist Church, were carried on the "CBS Walter Cronkite Evening News." He has been a preacher for The Protestant Hour, a preacher and lecturer for "Ministers Week" and other keynote events at Perkins School of Theology, Boston University School of Theology, Duke Divinity School, Wesley Theological Seminary, and Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He also served as a preacher for United Methodist Annual Conferences in Western Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Dakota, North Carolina and Arkansas; and as the lecturer for Pastors' Schools in 16 states.

While in Washington, D.C., Holmes served on the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches, chaired the Task Force on Homosexuality for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, founded the Lawyer's Guild, and served as Chairman of the Ethics Advisory Committee and trustee of Sibley Memorial Hospital.

He is married to Nancy Murray; they have two grown sons, Will and Chris, six grandchildren, and make their home in Maryland.

# Publisher's Comments

Resurgence Publishing Corporation is pleased to present *The Theology of Surprise: Exploring Life's Mysteries* by John L. Epps with a Foreword by William A. Holmes.

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John L. Epps has written "The Theology of Surprise" as a collection of essays, articles and reflections over a life time of his own encounters with life's mysteries. Through several decades he reflects on where mystery has impinged on his life as he sees it, part and parcel of the civilizing process around him.

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In the Foreword to "*The Theology of Surprise: Exploring Life's Mysteries*" **William A. Holmes**, Minister *Emeritus* of United Methodism's National Church in Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Memorial says:

"The Theology of Surprise: Exploring Life's Mysteries"....A book of essays on different subjects by the same author can be off-putting if that's all the subjects have in common. What one soon discovers in this book is that, for all its diversity of subjects, there is a bright thread running through John Epps' essays which connects them, not only to each other, but to an all-encompassing theological perspective. Without apology, that perspective is derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition – albeit existentially contemporized for persons living in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world..

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*WesleyNexus.org*

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*John Patterson*  
*Abby Gardens Community Trust*

Every Sunday I go to church and wonder why I am there. The words, hymns, creeds, and stories I learned with my mother's milk are often more of a hindrance to participation than an inspiration...I think restatement of faith is the challenge of our time, for those of us both in and out of the pew. I know John Epps to be uncommonly thoughtful, with broad life experience.

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